



---

# Portage and Its Past

---

Grace J. Potts

# Portage and Its Past

Grace J. Potts

Edited by Posie Tomlinson  
Drawings by Derek Rexton Rainey  
Photographs by Paul Butch

Portage Public Schools & the City of Portage Public Library  
Portage, Michigan

# Portage and the People

Copyright 1976

Portage and the People  
Portage Public Schools  
Portage, Michigan

Copyright © 1976  
Portage Public Schools  
All rights reserved

# Table of Contents

## Foreword

## Editor's Note

**1** Portage Country 11

*A sketch of Portage before white settlement including topography and general information on Potawatomi Indian life, local Indian trails and disposition of Indians to the West.*

**2** Then Came the Pioneers 17

*The white settlement of Portage from 1830 to about 1850 including identification of earliest pioneer families, land speculation prior to the Panic of 1837, formation of Portage Township in 1838, and agricultural and census statistics descriptive of the settlement in 1850.*

**3** How the Pioneers Lived 29

*Pioneer life from the hard trip by wagon from the East to the hard work waiting including building shelter, clearing land, and growing food. Chores and social life of pioneer men, women and children.*

**4** Portage Prospers 41

*Development of Portage from Civil War times to the early Twentieth Century. Identification of later settlers including anecdotes recalled by some of today's senior citizens. Growth of farming, other business ventures of residents and the effect of the industrial revolution on farm life.*

**5** The Swampland Becomes Valuable 53

*The history of celery farming in Portage by Dutch settlers. Celery growing from planting to marketing. The decline of celery farming and the development of the plant growing industry in Portage today.*

**6**

## Portage Schools 63

*The first two schools in Portage and the gradual increase to eight district schools. Conditions and education in an early district school. Population growth and crowding lead to establishment of Portage Agricultural School in 1922. Later consolidations, expansion and new facilities. Portage Schools today.*

**7**

## Churches and Other Organizations 91

*Church services first held in schools. Portage Methodist Episcopal Church built in 1902. First Reformed Church of Portage built in 1903. Other churches. The Grange. The Masonic Lodge. Women's organizations. Men's organizations. The Portage Public Library.*

**8**

## From Township to City 101

*Portage Township organized in 1838. Early officials and their duties. Township board meetings and the conduct of township business. Problems increase with growth. The Depression. The Portage Fire Department. The population explosion in Portage. The day that made history. Incorporation, December 31, 1963. The Portage Police Department. "Crossroads of Southwestern Michigan".*

**9**

## Commerce, Industry and the Professions 119

*Business and commerce in early Portage. The blacksmith. The carpenter. The sawmill. Agriculture. Real Estate and plat development. The general store. The development of lake property and resorts. The Upjohn Company builds in Portage — 1951. I-94 completed — 1959. Business, industry and professional services today.*

**10**

## Transportation and Recreation 133

*From Indian trails to streets and highways. The plank road, the railroad, and commercial transportation today. Early taverns and inns. Lake resorts. Cultural opportunities and recreational facilities today.*

## Appendix 145

# Foreword

The area that today comprises Portage, Michigan has been a crossroads throughout its history. The very name, *Portage*, was given to this community by early settlers who were aware that the Indians portaged between the Kalamazoo and St. Joseph Rivers using the lakes and streams in the area. That Portage remains a crossroads today is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that two of Michigan's major expressways, I-94 to the east and west and U.S. 131 to the north and south, intersect within the city limits.

The developments that occurred between the portaging by early day Indians and the construction of the vast concrete ribbons that criss-cross our state today are the essence of this book, *Portage and Its Past*. The history of our community is a varied one, filled with a host of colorful characters and marked by the hard work of frugal yankees and the perseverance of Dutch immigrants. It is appropriate that the written history of Portage was undertaken as one of the community's Bicentennial projects. It is equally appropriate that it involved countless members of the community and was co-sponsored by the City of Portage and the Portage Public Schools.

We anticipate that this book will be a source of nostalgic interest through its reflection of the past, as well as an inspiration to present residents who will be introduced to the pioneers of an earlier day. To this end, we offer *Portage and Its Past*, and we dedicate it to the thousands of Portage citizens who have contributed to the development of our community.

Betty Lee Ongley

Mayor of the City of Portage



Gayl F. Werme, President

Portage Board of Education



# About the Author



According to his epitaph, Robert Frost had a love affair with life. It could be said that Grace Potts has had a love affair with history. When she was born on the northwest side of Kalamazoo, Michigan, it was a city considerably smaller than the present size of Portage, Michigan, subject of her new book, *Portage and Its Past*. Her relationship with Portage began in the 1920's when she served as student teacher at the new Portage Agricultural School and was renewed years later when she conducted a workshop for student librarians in the techniques of researching and writing local histories.

A graduate of Kalamazoo Central High School, the author earned her AB degree at Western State Teachers College in Kalamazoo and her MA degree at Columbia University. Her teaching career included three years in Battle Creek, Michigan, one year as an exchange teacher in Spokane, Washington, and forty-one years in Kalamazoo, where she taught kindergarten through third grade at five different schools. She also served the Kalamazoo Schools as principal at Hillcrest, Lindberg, Knollwood and Oakwood elementary schools.

Miss Potts' interest in travel has taken her to all fifty states and the major European countries at least once. An abiding, lifelong interest in American history accounts for her knowledge of antiques and her skill in many of the crafts which were essential to the early life of this country. Steeped in local history from early childhood, Miss Potts is the author of two history books written for elementary age children entitled *Kalamazoo Long Ago* and *Kalamazoo Today*. In addition she authored an inservice guide for teachers entitled *Learning More About School in School*.

Although retired from teaching seven years, her energy and enthusiasm belie her age. Her persistence in searching out missing details to complete an historical picture contributed many interesting facts to her chronicle of Portage. Indeed, co-workers never ceased to be entertained by her anecdotes of local characters and edified by an endless stream of artifacts from the past including many old photos, a handmade school slate, bonnets, lace-trimmed aprons, quilts and a variety of other handwork.

After she had familiarized herself with Portage from an historical perspective, Miss Potts took her associates on a series of driving tours of Portage with a running commentary on historic buildings and locations. After one particularly varied expedition, her audience teasingly challenged her to take them, Indian-fashion, on a canoe tour down Portage Creek. When it became apparent that she would accept any challenge, she was thereafter affectionately known as "Amazing Grace"!

Posie Tomlinson  
1976

## Editor's Note

*As far as we know . . . .* This qualification has surely been offered by all who have participated in the reconstruction of a local history as preface to their offspring. History does indeed change as new sources of information and new facts are discovered. What follows is a first effort to gather together the known facts concerning the development of Portage, Michigan. The story is not complete and apology is made in advance for inevitable omissions and inaccuracies. They were not intended.

The text which follows was written with the dual purpose in mind of providing a readable account of Portage history for local residents and history buffs everywhere and an accurate history to be used at several levels in the public school curriculum.

At every step in the process of producing this book, the help of a host of interested people has been crucial. Senior citizens shared their memories and their memorabilia; the Archives Department and the History Department at Western Michigan University as well as the Kalamazoo Public Library offered information and guidance; the Kalamazoo Gazette and the Upjohn Company supplied valuable photographs from their files; Dolly Polson and Pat Betwee, in particular, and staff members, in general, of both the Audio Visual and Library Services Department of the Portage Public Schools and the Portage Public Library contributed in countless ways; and local citizens generously offered their time and talents to an array of tasks from clerical to research work, from photography to cartography. Most importantly they shared ideas and tendered encouragement.

This project has been a learning experience for all who have worked on it. We hope it will stimulate further investigation and increase interest among Portage citizens in their heritage.

About the Author



# 1

---

---

## Portage Country

---

---

*Portage!* What does the name convey? What picture comes to mind? Imagine a canoe or a flatboat carried on sturdy shoulders from one waterway to another. If the boat is especially long, two men carrying it or even three. Carrying it along the deep trodden path through heavy forest, through oak openings, skirting a marsh or over open prairie . . . this is the way the Indians traveled in the days long ago. They carried the boat until it could again be lowered into the water and the Indian braves and their families could be on their way.

In Portage it is so easy to travel by water. This is the township that has more water surface than any other township in Kalamazoo County. This is the township where the waters flow two ways. In the southern half most of the streams drain into the St. Joseph River and in the northern half they wind their way into the Kalamazoo River. Eventually they both empty into Lake Michigan. It is fascinating to trace the rivers on a map. There are many twists and turns, so many lakes to cross, all flowing through what turned out to be some of the richest farm land in southwestern Michigan.

Perhaps it is early spring . . . the Potawatomi Indians have arrived back at their beloved Indian Fields from their winter campground. The warming weather readies the soil so the squaws may plant the corn, pumpkins, squash, beans and gourds needed for winter supplies. The furs from the winter's trapping have been exchanged at the white man's trading post for brightly colored beads, hatchets, knives, colorful cloth and the "firewater" which the white man makes. The braves have been busy hunting and fishing so there is a goodly supply of meat to be dried and made into *pemmican*.

Now, perhaps in summer or early fall, the men

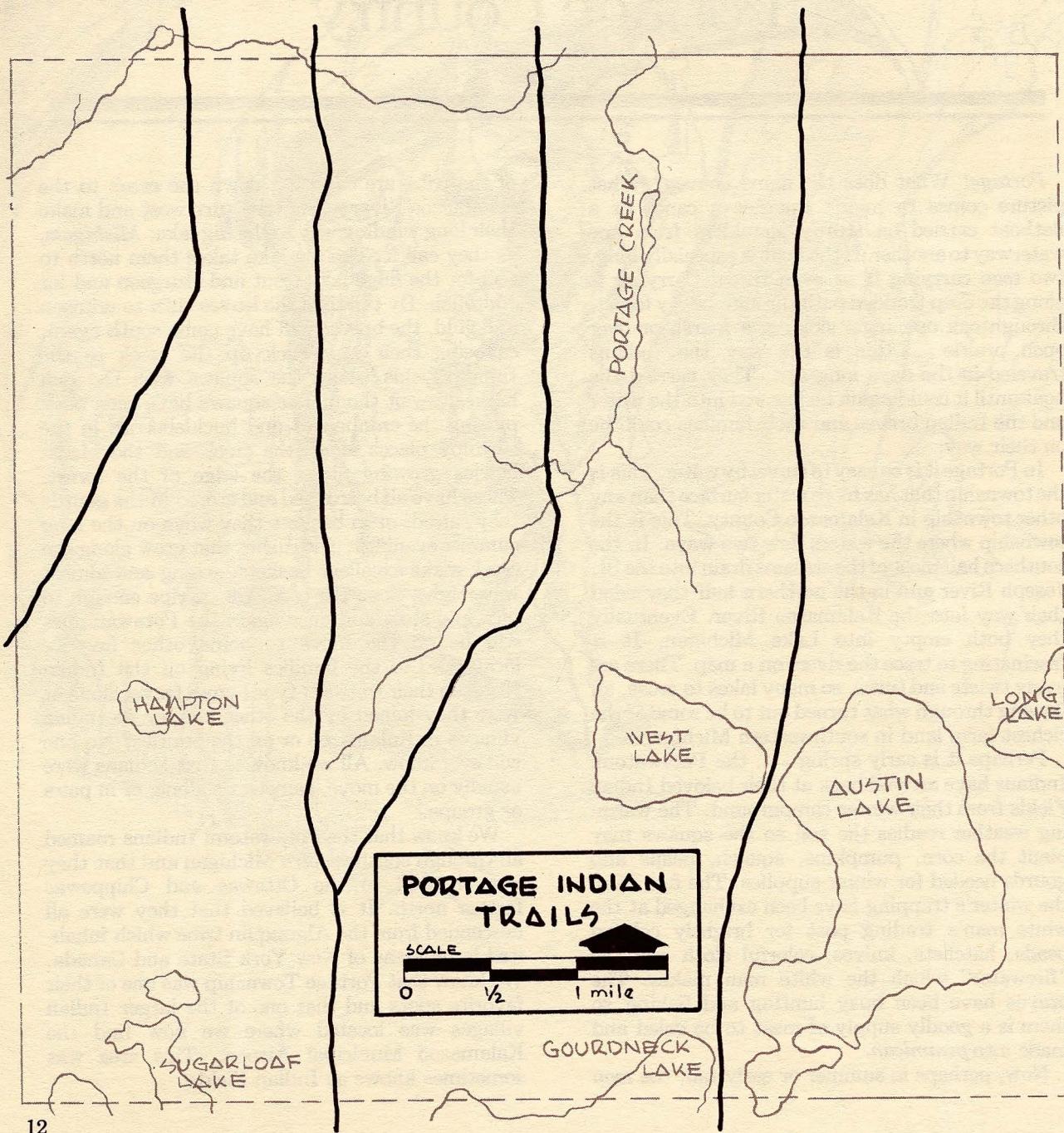
of the tribe are canoeing down the creek to the Kalamazoo River where they turn west and make their long winding way to the big lake, *Mishigam*, as they call it. The big lake takes them north to fish for the huge lake trout and sturgeon and for whitefish. By the time the leaves turn to crimson and gold, the braves will have come south again, canoeing their way back up the creek to the Indian Fields where the squaws with the rich harvest await them. The squaws have been busy picking the cranberries and huckleberries in the swampy places along the creek and the blackberries growing along the edge of the forest. These have all been dried and stored in the gourds they raised, or in baskets they wove on the long summer evenings. The rushes that grow along the creek make excellent baskets, strong and almost watertight. Soon the corn will be ripe enough to pick and store and once again the Potawatomies will be on the move to some other favorite location. Did the families living on the Indian Fields in their wigwam-type homes travel alone or were they joined by the other families in Indian villages in Kalamazoo or on the prairies? No one will ever know. All we know is that Indians were usually on the move, sometimes alone, or in pairs or groups.

We know that the Potawatomi Indians roamed all through southwestern Michigan and that they were related to the Ottawas and Chippewas farther north. It is believed that they were all descended from the Algonquin tribe which inhabited large areas of New York State and Canada. We know that Portage Township was one of their favorite spots and that one of the larger Indian villages was located where we now find the Kalamazoo Municipal Airport. This area was sometimes known as Indian Fields.

Portage was an ideal spot for them. Three well marked Indian trails running north and south must have been in almost constant use. What is now Portage Street was no doubt the longest trail coming north from the old Sauk Trail, later called the Chicago Road and now designated as U.S. 12. In Portage, it went between the two large lakes of Austin and West. Then, after a slight curve around the upper lake, it straightened out again and ran through the hardwood forest for quite some distance. Then it started to curve again, skirting the swamps that were almost continuous, until it reached the great east and west trail known as the Potawatomi Trail, later called the Territorial Road

and now Michigan Avenue in Kalamazoo. This seemed to be the meeting place of trails that came from all directions.

Another popular Portage trail came up from the Chicago Road and the St. Joseph River, passed through what is now Niles and along Route 66 to Three Rivers. It then headed north over the prairie and curved slightly to the east until it reached what is now Westnedge Avenue. On reaching Westnedge, it had to stay clear of the swampy area and creek and just before reaching the Potawatomi trail in Kalamazoo, it had some hilly country to cross, besides skirting a few swamps. What is now Oakland Drive was the third and rather minor trail



going straight across the prairie, then through heavy forest, skirting swamps and then joining the east-west trail as it descended the hill where the old buildings of Western Michigan University are located.

Following any of these trails, we can let our imaginations run riot. Most of the hardwood forests are gone, but there are enough large trees still standing to make one realize how awe-inspiring it must have been. A few patches of the oak openings are still around and wood lots along the way help one to picture the forest. Of course, the creek and lakes are still here and the visible muck land which once was nothing but swamps and marsh covered with tamarack, bushes and sedges.

History tells us that the numerous swamps and lakes in Michigan kept the very early settlers away. No doubt the early trappers and traders had something to do with the reluctance of the pioneers to come to Michigan. They were not averse to keeping the territory to themselves. Many of them were reaping a rich harvest from furs of the animals that roamed the forest and the beavers and muskrats along its waters. The demand for these furs by the European royalty and the wealthy lords was as great as ever. It constituted one of the top exports of America to the European Continent and America was in desperate need of European-manufactured goods.

The Great Lakes were another barrier when it came to crossing into Michigan territory. The Yankee hill farmers and the farmers of New York State and Pennsylvania had every reason to seek first the rich prairie lands of Ohio and Indiana. After the construction of the Erie Canal in 1825, it was a bit easier to reach Michigan Territory. As is always the case there were some who decided to do a bit of exploring on their own, and as they returned to their homes tales of the beauty of Michigan must have been favorite topics of conversation around the fireplaces.

Although Portage was a favorite of the Indians, the early pioneers bypassed it in favor of the prairies and the land on either side of the Potawatomi Trail and the Old Sauk Trail. The Indians continued to occupy the land regardless of the treaty made by Governor Cass in 1817. It is doubtful if the Indians raising their corn and other food on the Indian Fields or fishing in one of the beautiful lakes even realized that according to the treaty they were on American government land. On the whole the Potawatomi tribe was very friendly and quite willing to share what they had with the early settlers. In return they expected the pioneers to do the same. They had no regard for privacy. It must have been a bit crowded in those early log cabins when a group of Indians decided to pay a visit.

Chief Pokagon from near White Pigeon is said to have been a frequent visitor and had a special



*Chief Pokagon, a friend of early Portage settlers*

*Potawatomi hunter*



regard for some of the early settlers. He and a small group of the Potawatomi were so well thought of that in 1840 when hundreds of them were deported farther west he and his group were allowed to stay in Michigan. Today there is a monument to the chief at the junction of U.S. 131 and U.S. 20.

By 1840 the settlers had come to Portage and most of the surrounding area. Some of the Indians had become a nuisance to the pioneers. Not accustomed to the ways of the pioneers, and not understanding the treaty and ownership of property, they continued using the land as in former days. This led to a good deal of trouble between the two groups. When valuable animals disappeared or new plowed fields were overrun by hunting braves, there was considerable objection by the pioneers. So the Indians were sent to new lands in Wisconsin and Iowa. As they gathered on the banks of the Kalamazoo River to start the long journey west, there was a great deal of wailing and

rebellion. There was much hardship along the way and many died. Others escaped and found their way back to Michigan to be taken in by Pokagon and his people. There is a marker at the old New York Central Depot today to mark the spot of departure. Today there is an Indian reservation near Athens, another near Mount Pleasant and one near Cross Village. There are descendants of the Indians living on all of these reservations, but the number is small. The large majority of descendants living in Michigan live in the cities and small towns. They follow a number of occupations and are constantly branching out into others. At the last census there were well over 7,000 Indian inhabitants and the number is growing. It would be interesting to know if any of their ancestors ever occupied the Indian Fields in Portage, roamed through the forest or canoed on Portage Creek . . . .

*A Potawatomi village*







# 2

---

---

## Then Came the Pioneers

---

---

In 1830 William Bishop made the first entry in the books of what would become Portage Township and is now the city of Portage. It was then part of Brady Township and later part of Pavilion Township. Mr. Bishop had settled on a small piece of land in the southwest corner of the township north of Schoolcraft Township bordering on Prairie Ronde.

A man by the name of Herring built a crude log cabin on the west of the township that same year. Although it is said he lived in the cabin for a short time, there is no evidence that he ever entered his name for any government land in Kalamazoo County. This was not an unusual procedure among the early pioneers coming into Michigan. As word began to filter down into Ohio, Indiana and back east to New England and New York State, many an adventuresome individual came to explore southwestern Michigan. They often made a deal with the Indians or if there were no evidence of Indian habitation they would erect a *claim shanty*, as these cabins were called.

By 1830 many of the larger prairies of Kalamazoo County had been claimed by the first settlers who came this way. This was particularly true of Prairie Ronde, Gull Prairie and Grand Prairie. Much of this land had been entered at White Pigeon where the government land office was then located, and was claimed by permanent settlers. The prairies had particularly rich soil, and although plowing through the tall and heavy grass was difficult, there were no trees to cut down and uproot. In fact, the tall grass and roots were so heavy that it took from four to five teams of oxen to pull the wooden plow with steel blade through the compact earth. After a day of plowing the blade had to be sharpened at the blacksmith shop before it could be used again. Often this meant a trip of

several miles to the blacksmith shop after a day of hard work. As more of the prairies were settled, some pioneers went into the business of "breaking up." As the threshers did at a later date, the "breakers up" would go from farm to farm with their teams and break up the soil for the owner. It has been said they made as much as \$5.00 for plowing one acre of land. This was big money in those days when an acre of government land cost \$1.25, but the man wielding the plow had to have strong arms, excellent health and be the owner of at least four teams of oxen and a sturdy plow. The plows used by the early pioneers were usually made of hard maple which grew in abundance in southwestern Michigan forests. In addition to keeping their plows in top condition the "breakers up" had to provide for their oxen.

In Portage there was not an overabundance of prairie land to be broken up. It had only 300 acres of prairie land compared to 13,000 in Prairie Ronde and 2500 on Gull Prairie, and it had been by-passed by the earliest settlers as it was in close proximity to several acres of land used by the Indians to raise their crops during the summer months. This land, known for years as Indian Fields, was located in the northeast section of Portage Township which is now the Kalamazoo Municipal Airport.

Dry Prairie was west of this area on the other side of Portage Creek. At this junction the west side of the creek was decidedly swampy while the east side had rather a high bank. The swampy areas were infested with mosquitoes which were anathema to the pioneers. Not only did they cause unbearable itching, they often brought on an attack of the ague, now known as malaria. This caused chills and heavy fevers and left the patient very weak and unable to work. It was no wonder that the adventuresome men and women of the day

stayed away from the swamps and marshes whenever possible.

Then, too, one of the more important Indian trails coming from White Pigeon on the old Sauk trail and going to the Kalamazoo River passed between the two large lakes in Portage. These lakes, surrounded by marshlands, were of little use

for farming. So in those very early years Portage was ignored. But as other sections of land in Kalamazoo County began to be occupied the pioneers coming in the early 1830's gave Portage a second look.

In 1831 Caleb Sweetland and the three Cooley brothers, Thomas, Arad and Benjamin, came from New York State on an exploring trip. After deciding on Dry Prairie, Arad Cooley was left to enter the land and erect some kind of shelter. The other two Cooley brothers and Mr. Sweetland returned to New York, and after settling their affairs, Sweetland and Thomas Cooley returned with their families the following spring during mud time. Benjamin Cooley remained in New York. The trip from Detroit on the *Chicago Road* was so bad they had to leave part of their belongings in Coldwater to be picked up later by wagon and oxen.

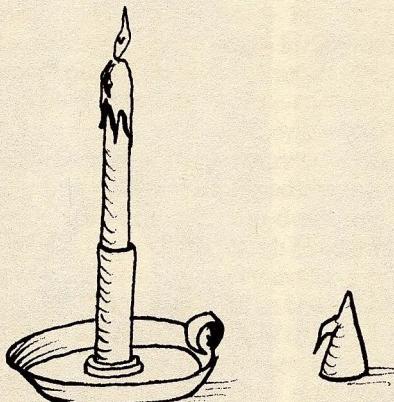
While Caleb Sweetland and Thomas Cooley were collecting their goods and families in New York State a few other pioneers arrived to claim



Clarissa and Joseph Beckley.

*Children of Joseph and Clarissa Sweetland Beckley.*  
Standing: Emily Beckley Smith, Mary Beckley Cronkite, Joseph Beckley, Charlie Beckley, Jennie Beckley Buckland. Seated: Lucius Beckley, Marcia Beckley Sutherland, Fannie Beckley Pike.





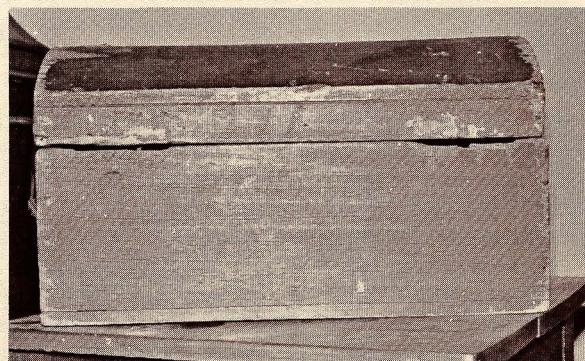
land in what is now the city of Portage. Jonas Woodard, Job Meyers, Ruel Starr, Martin Lathrop and Elijah Root decided to settle in the northeast portion, while John E. Howard and his sons entered land closer to the Cooleys and Sweetland in the northwest portion. Some of this land may have been entered previous to their arrival through a land agent. In the scant historical material available there is not always agreement on the exact date of government entries. Allison Kinne, Isaac Brooks, Prudence Wattles, daughter of John Howard, and her three sons soon joined the northwest group. Joseph Beckley, brother-in-law of Arad Cooley, would have arrived in 1835 but his wife became ill on the trip and they remained in Ohio for a year. They reached Michigan in 1836 with their first-born daughter and settled on the farm next to the Howard family. Mrs. Arad Cooley and Mrs. Beckley were related to Caleb Sweetland. Thomas Chaffee, Otis Pitts, Thomas Blackmer, Enoch French, Joseph Eastland, Frances Downey, Eli Harrison and the Crooks brothers all entered land in the eastern part. Ebenezer Stone seems to be the only pioneer who preferred to settle nearer to the center of the area and he soon erected a tavern.

In the meantime, Moses Austin elected to settle on the northwest side of what is now known as Austin Lake. He arrived in 1833 with his hired man and younger son, Benjamin, in a wagon pulled by a team of four oxen. In a history of Kalamazoo County, published in 1880, the following description of their trip appears: "The trip of the party from New York had been an exciting one, especially for the youth. They made their way through the 'Cattaraugus Swamp,' and at Dunkirk embarked on the steamer 'Sheldon Thompson,' - the first the junior member of the trio had ever boarded. In due time they reached Detroit, and then the real difficulties of the journey began. They had brought along a team of their own, and started with it towards the setting sun; and, indeed, it seemed the sun would set upon their career as emigrants, and leave them fast in the mud of Eastern Michigan. The 'going'

from Detroit to Ypsilanti was fearful beyond description; seas of mud disrupted their advance everywhere; but finally the distance was passed between the two points, and from Ypsilanti westward they bowled along at the rate of thirty or forty miles a day, through woods and openings, and across streams and prairies, reaching the embryo city of Kalamazoo on the day previously stated. According to B.M. Austin's recollection, the place then contained about a dozen houses."

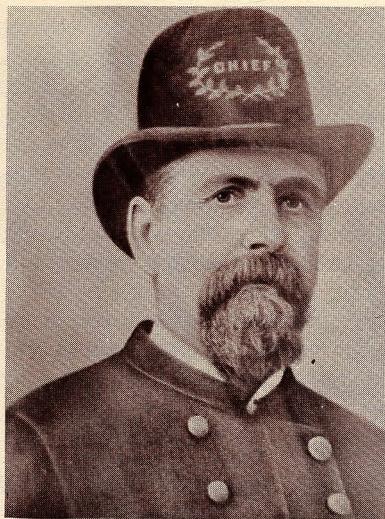
After erecting a crude shanty, the Austin party immediately began building a good sized, two story log cabin. The following spring Austin's

*Chest made for Clarissa Sweetland Beckley which came with her on the covered wagon in 1836.*



*Erma A. Bloom, 92 year old granddaughter of early pioneers, Joseph and Clarissa Beckley.*

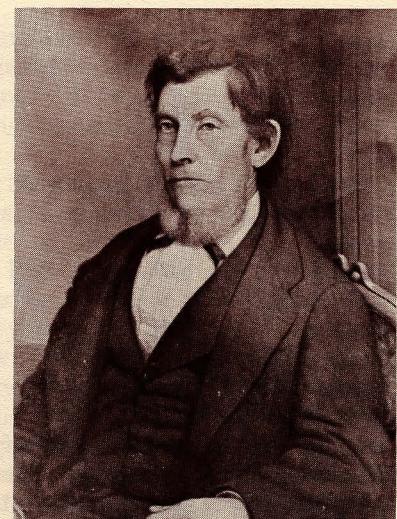




*Stephen Wattles, son of Prudence Howard Wattles, in his Kalamazoo Police Chief uniform.*



*Catherine and Stephen Howard, early Portage settlers.*



wife and older son arrived with their household goods and farm animals. That summer they cleared some of the land and built an addition to the cabin which was then used as a tavern. The tavern did a thriving business as it was on the direct trail from the Chicago Road to Kalamazoo.

The above mentioned people are the early pioneer settlers of Portage. Although changes began taking place almost immediately, they are the families who cleared the land, built homes and barns and, in a few cases, operated some type of business. Most of them were still on the census rolls two decades later. Some of their descendants were still around and running their farms at the turn of the century. Perhaps the following three men should also be included in the list of early pioneers: Daniel Cahill, who bought some land from Arad Cooley; Jacob Van Hoesen, who bought land from his brother-in-law, George Martin; and Alvin Bacon, who bought a large tract of land from a speculator in 1838. John Kilgore settled a few years later.

Three important changes took place as early as 1834. Elijah Root built a sawmill on Portage Creek, Thomas and Arad Cooley bought and improved the gristmill on the northwest corner of what are now Kilgore Road and Lovers Lane, and the U.S. land office moved from White Pigeon to Kalamazoo. At this time land speculation was rife all over the country and Kalamazoo County and surrounding counties seemed to be favorite locations for such activity. What is now the city of Portage was no exception. Some of the permanent settlers began adding to their original purchases but the majority of entries were made by speculators who lived in the village of Kalamazoo and in the East. In 1835 and 1836 Portage had 125 entries.

The village of Kalamazoo became a madhouse. People set up tents along Main Street for shelter. The taverns were crowded. In 1836 alone, 1,634,511 acres of land were sold at \$1.25 an acre. There was more land sold in the Kalamazoo land office that year than in any other land office in the United States. All land in Portage Township was entered including the creek, lakes and swamps. It is doubtful if the speculators in their eastern offices knew what they were buying. Most transactions were handled by land agents.

Then it was over. In the beginning of 1837 only fourteen pieces of land exchanged ownership in Portage Township. The panic of 1837 had started. The U.S. began its first big depression. Banks failed all over the country and the paper money they had issued was worthless. Trading was at a standstill. This same year Michigan became a state.

With the failure of the banks and the worthlessness of paper money, all the country suffered. The industries on the eastern seaboard which had been making rapid strides in weaving cotton and woolens and manufacturing farm implements, transportation vehicles and paper almost came to a standstill. The ports of New York and New Orleans were practically without goods to ship as the European markets would not accept U.S. money. Europe, as well as America, suffered from the depression as few goods from Europe entered the U.S.

The peasants of Europe, always poor, became poorer and all ships that did come from Europe were loaded with immigrants. The East, being in the grip of the depression, had little to offer in jobs, so many of these immigrants of the 1830's and 1840's found their way west. A goodly number of them became hired men and worked hard to help

clear the farms owned by the early pioneers. They were used to hard work, knew how to handle animals and were willing to work for small wages. The food was plentiful, if not varied. They had adequate lodging and were able to save what they made. Salaries were about \$7.00 or \$8.00 a month plus room and board. The married ones often occupied the log cabins abandoned by the owners after they built their own frame dwellings.

So in spite of the panic and with hard and frugal living, Portage Township began to grow and prosper. The land that reverted to the government was gradually acquired by some of the first settlers so they could enlarge their holdings; other farmers coming in from other townships and from New York State bought small holdings and began clearing the land. Soon it was found that the land was excellent and very productive. There were numerous oak openings where the widely spaced trees were girdled or cut around so that they would die and allow sunlight to reach the ground. Crops such as corn and pumpkins could be planted before the ground was plowed. The trees were cleared later as time became available which provided even more productive area. The oak openings were easy to plow as the oaks were spaced far apart and a team of oxen could be led between and around the trees. Then other crops such as wheat were planted.

The hardwood forest was more difficult, but once cleared was found to be most productive. About three-fourths of the area was in timbered land and it carried a great variety of trees. Several kinds of maple and oak, hickory, black walnut, basswood, butternut, black cherry, ash, tulip, sycamore, sourgum, birch, larch cedar and a few pines were found in the primeval forest. In clearing the land some of the trees were burned, but it was soon found that many of the logs were valuable and

the lumber could be used for a variety of purposes. By this time several sawmills had been established in nearby communities and in the winter months ox teams could haul these logs to the mills for lumber. Some of the logs were kept on the farms to be split into rails for the rail fences that surrounded practically every field. Other logs could be used for the frame houses and barns that almost every farmer erected after living in a log cabin for a year or two.

Some of the settlers came to Portage without their families and after selecting their land erected a crude shanty. Then with the help of a carpenter they built a small frame house before returning to the East for their families, animals and furniture. On their return, the clearing and developing of the land began in earnest.

During the next two decades the southern part of Portage Township was settled and names such as Hawkins, Pike, Bacon, Gilmore, Middleton, Meredith, Durkee, Campbell, Matteson, Chubb, Howe, Sheldon and others were appearing on township property deeds. There were now four Lathrop families and one of them had a sizable hotel almost in the center of the township on what is now called Westnedge Ave. Mr. Dunham had started a nursery around 1840. Growing fruit had become a reality. During this time West Lake was called Pike Lake, according to an old map. Two Pike families had farms adjoining the lake shore. Moses Pike came in 1836 and had a large farm east of Portage Center, inherited by his son Nathan. Orange Pike came later but was not a relative.

At least one son of an early pioneer achieved considerable fame as a manufacturer. Benjamin Austin, son of Moses Austin, Portage tavern keeper and farmer, went to Kalamazoo in 1844. There he learned the coppersmith and tinsmith business, then ran a dry goods store for seven

*First John Howard home built in the early 1830's as it looks today.*



*First John Howard home being removed from the newer farmhouse which still stands on Angling Road.*





*William and Sarah Campbell.*

years and later entered the wagon business. He did a thriving business manufacturing Jackson Wagons, selling some to local farmers and shipping many others outside the state. Moses Austin and his other son, William, eventually sold the tavern and moved to Kalamazoo to enter into business with Benjamin; but they left the legacy of Austin Lake in Portage.

It is interesting to note that a great many of the settlers in Portage Township came from Genesee and Canandaigua Counties in New York State. It seems that when word traveled back East about the beauty of the landscape, the productiveness of the soil and the cheapness of the land, several were anxious to sell their farms and join their former friends. Some of them came to see the place for themselves; others instructed their friends to buy the land for them. Whatever they did, it was soon apparent that the barges on the Erie Canal, which had opened in 1825, carried a steady stream of traffic. On entering Buffalo the passengers transferred to the Lake Erie steamer to Detroit and after stocking up on food and other essentials started for Kalamazoo County. By this time the Territorial Road had been somewhat improved and there were numerous taverns, log

*Log Cabin built by William and Sarah Campbell and later incorporated into the house standing on Sprinkle at Centre. Pictured are their children, Alice and Willie. Willie married Flora Milham.*

cabins and frame homes of early settlers along the way.

Early pioneers were often made welcome in settlers' homes regardless of crowded conditions. At other times they stayed in taverns along the way. Many of the early pioneers chose the Chicago Road and then came north on one of the Indian trails. By 1838 there were from twenty to twenty-two families living in Portage Township, the majority on farms north of the present Romence Road. They paid a total of \$266.11 in taxes.

According to the 1850 census, there were 120 families living in Portage Township. There were seven carpenters, three blacksmiths and a brick-layer, all kept busy building homes and other farm buildings. With the exception of about 400 acres, the northern one third of the township was owned by farmers busy improving their farms. Part of the land still owned by the government was along Westnedge Avenue and was mostly marsh or swampland. The southern one third of the township with the exception of the southeast corner still contained a great deal of government land. Vaydor Pierce and Stephen Vickery owned large tracts of land in the area while Ebenezer Durkee and Harvey Booth had acquired a good many acres in the center section. Some of the early pioneers had bought land in the center as well as some newcomers.

An agricultural report of 1850 lists the total value of Portage Township as \$41,185 (\$35,334 in real estate and \$5,851 in personal property). Tax money raised on this amount was disbursed in the following way: \$219.13 to the state; \$398.55 to the county; \$170.55 to the six schools (with 240

students); \$60.00 to the township; \$66.68 to the highway commission; and \$228.75 for highway maintenance. By modern standards these figures are unbelievably low, but when compared with wages of the day included in the same report, they fit into the picture. A carpenter received \$2.00 a day without board; a female domestic received \$1.25 a week plus board; and a laborer was paid \$.75 a day plus board or \$1.00 without board.

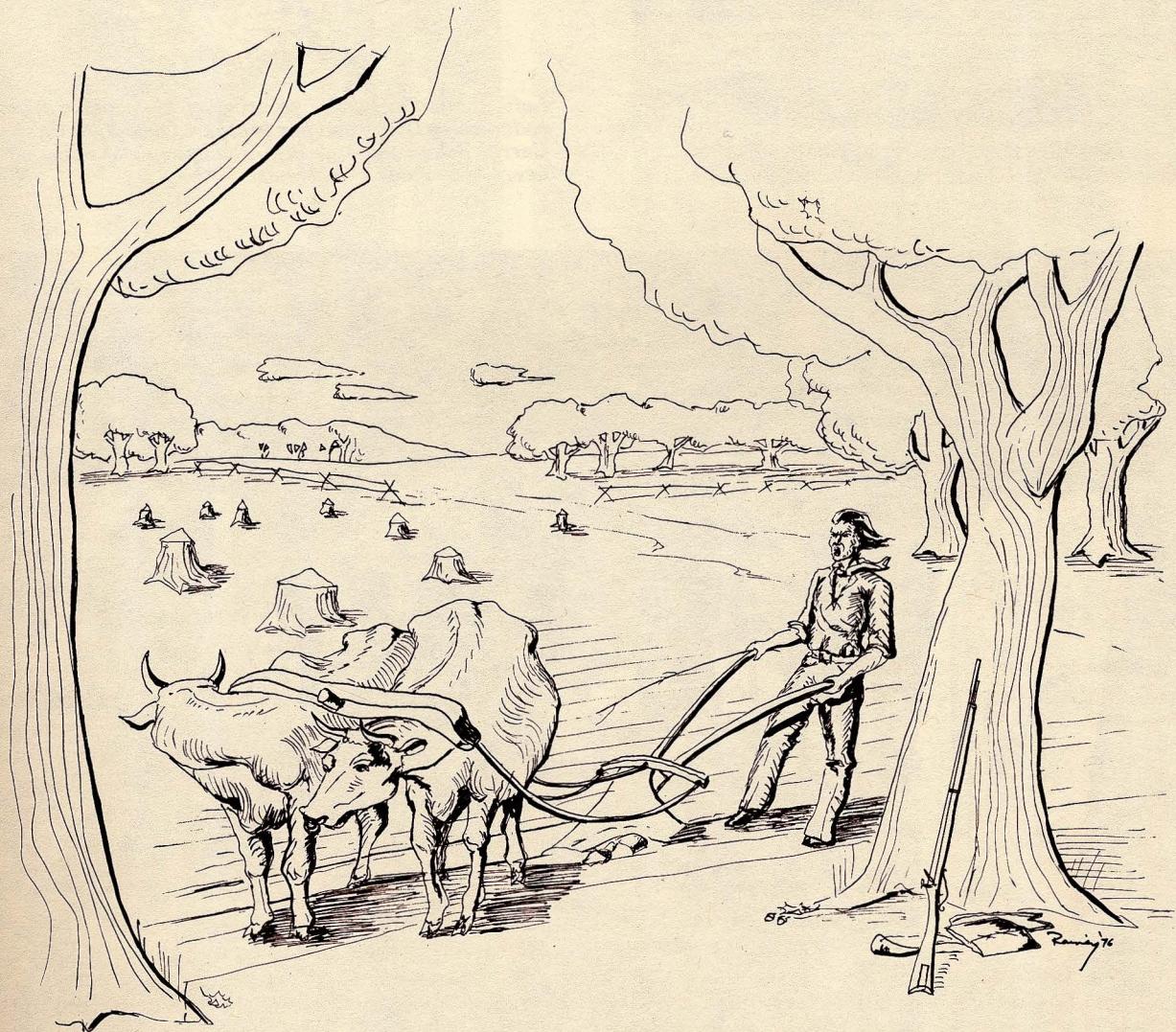
Long before this, Portage Township had been separated from Pavilion Township. In March of 1838, the first meeting was held at the home of Moses Austin and he was instrumental in naming the township after the principal stream which ran through it. At an organizational meeting held later that spring at the home of Elijah Root, Moses Austin was elected chairman and Caleb

Sweetland clerk. The meeting was then adjourned to the tavern of Ebenezer Stone, and Elijah Root was elected supervisor and Caleb Sweetland town clerk. After other officers were elected, it is said considerable whiskey was consumed to celebrate the occasion. Whiskey was supposed to be good for the ague, and perhaps these early township officers were taking no chances with the mosquitoes as warm weather was coming on.

The following men held office from 1839 up to the Civil War:

*Supervisors*

1839-43	Caleb Sweetland
1844	Martin Lathrop
1845-46	Roceter Howard
1847-48	Daniel Cahill
1854	Allison Kinne

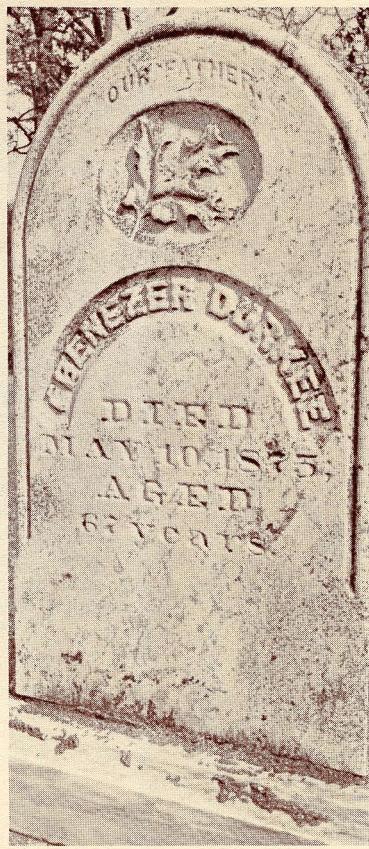
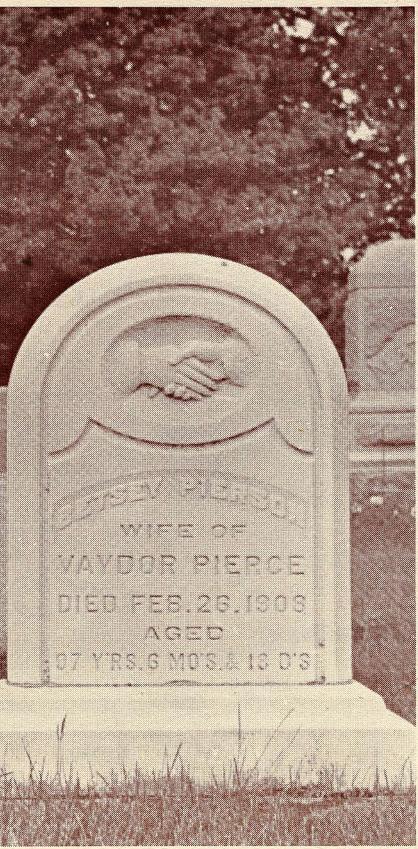
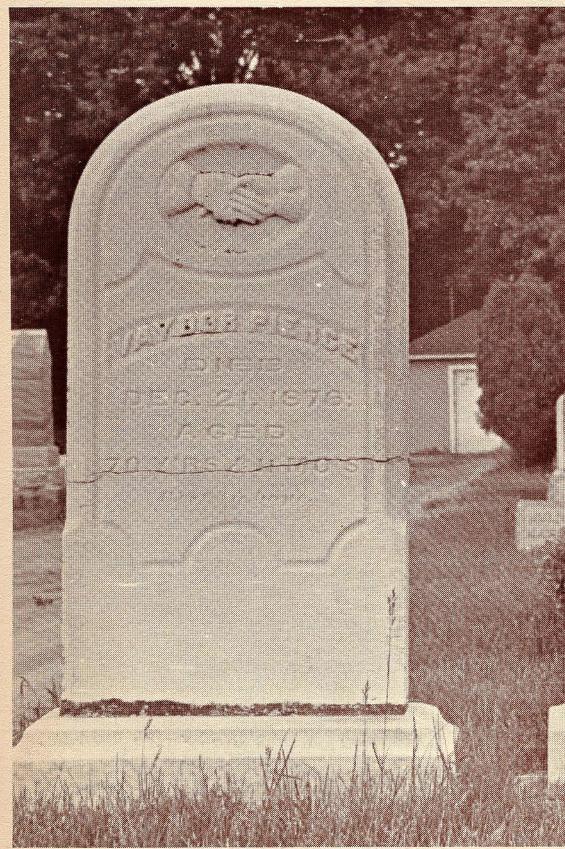
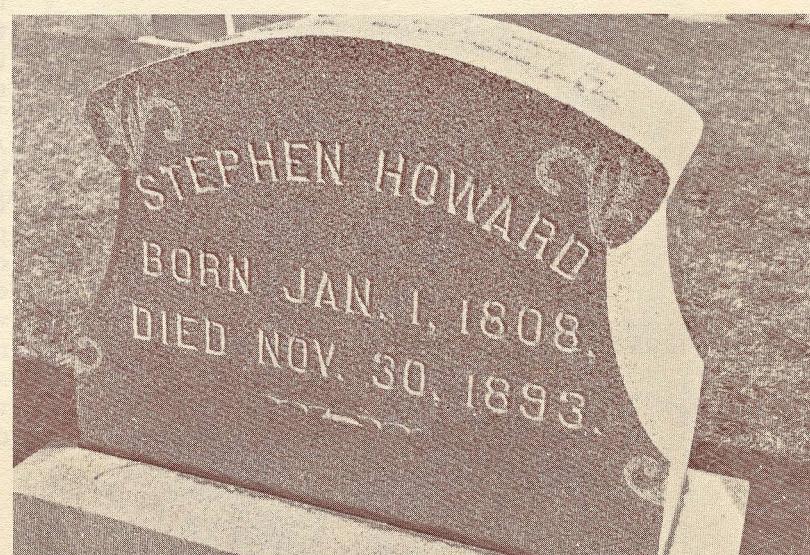
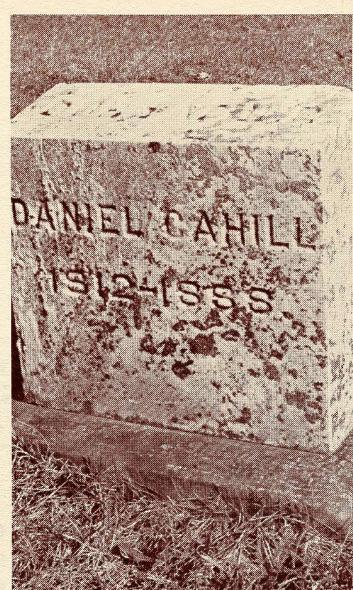
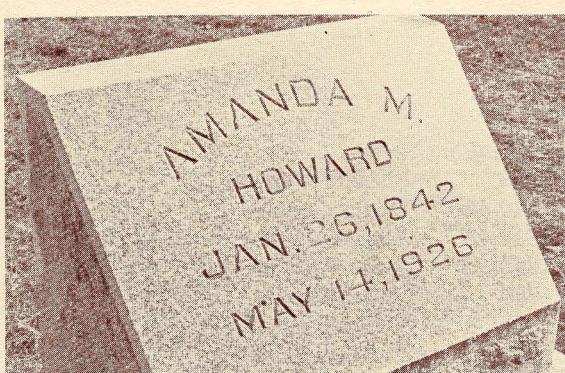


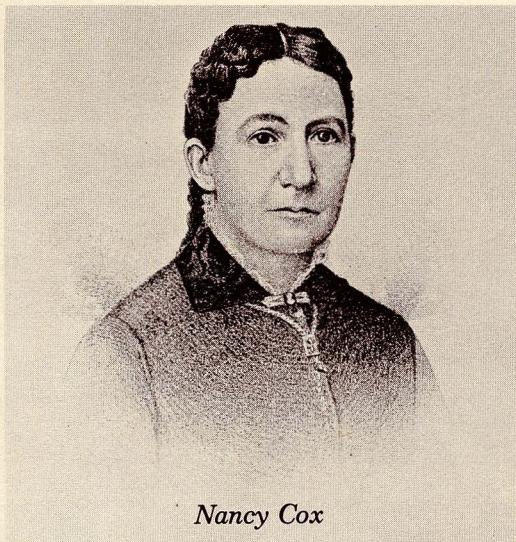


1855-57	John Parker
1858	J. Eastland, Jr.
1859-60	Daniel Cahill
1861-65	John Oliver
<i>Treasurers</i>	
1839-41	Caleb Sweetland
1842-43	Martin Lathrop
1844-45	Ebenezer Durkee
1846	William Smith, Jr.
1847-49	Roswell Page
1850-51	Roswell Aldrich
1852-53	George Stone
1854	Rodney Russell
1855-56	Hugh Campbell
1857	George Oliver
1858	William Trumble
1859	Reuben Booth
1859-60	Asa Ingersoll
1862-63	Leander Bonfoey

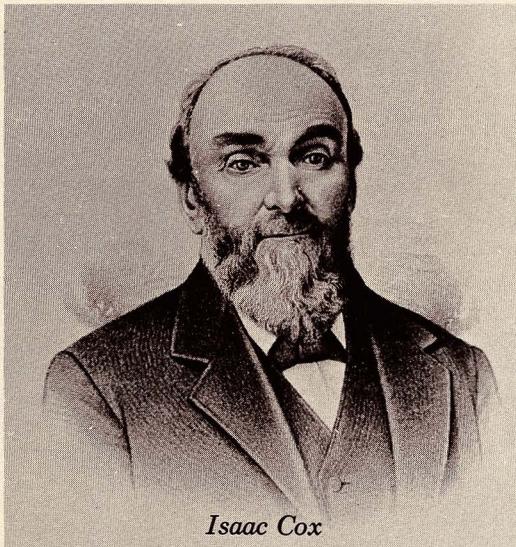
*Left: Benjamin Cooley painting of his cousins Gertrude Cooley Curry and her brother. Owned by Donald Curry. Below and opposite: Tombstones of early pioneers in Portage cemeteries.*



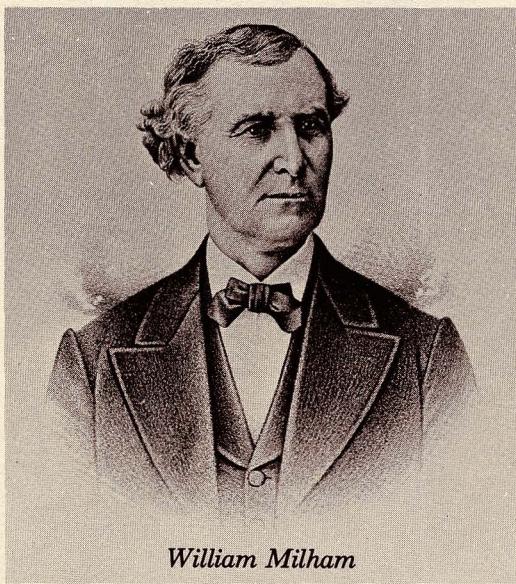




*Nancy Cox*



*Isaac Cox*

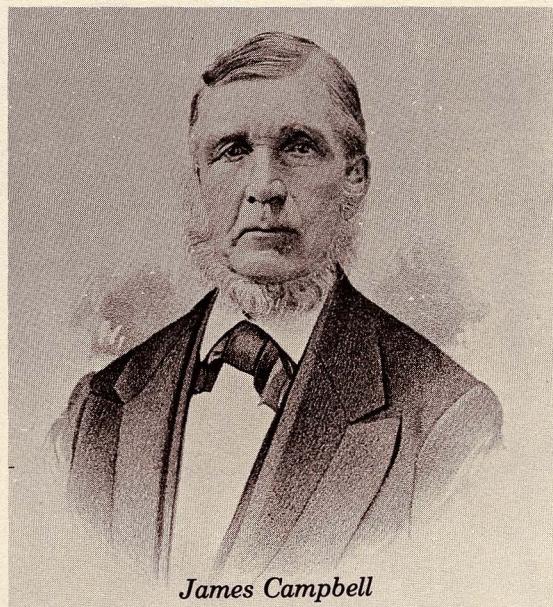


*William Milham*

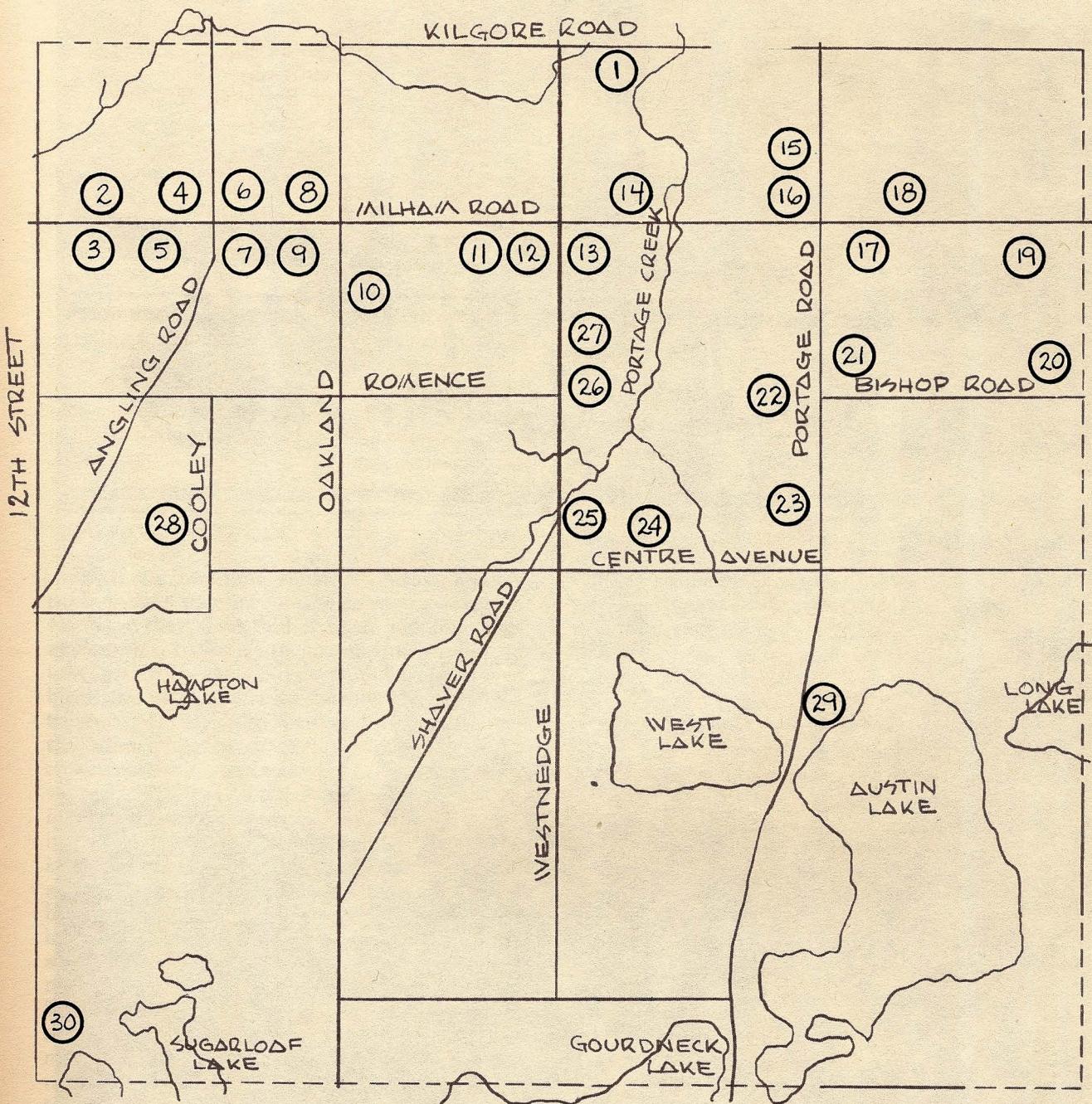
*Township Clerks*

1839	Martin Lathrop
1840-46	Daniel Cahill
1847-48	Joseph Eastland, Jr.
1849	Isaac Brooks
1850	Isaac Hope
1851-53	J. Eastland, Jr.
1854	Roceter Howard
1855-58	George Sheldon
1859-60	John B. Taber
1861	Daniel Jones
1862-63	Ebenezer Durkee

As can be easily seen the early officers were all chosen from the first settlers. It was not until the mid-fifties that a few new names appeared and it was in the sixties that names began to appear of residents living south of Centre Street. Before that time all elected officers lived in the northern half of the township. In addition, in those early years the majority of the farmers held more than one office. Township offices included Justice of the Peace, Assessor, Commissioner of Highways, Drain Commissioner, School Inspector, Overseer of the Poor, and Constable. There is no doubt that the pioneers of Portage Township and their sons controlled the political destiny of the area. They did a good job. Besides being excellent farmers with their holdings showing constant improvement, they built new homes and farm buildings, started schools, and provided neighboring farmers with a gristmill, two sawmills, a nursery and a post office.



*James Campbell*

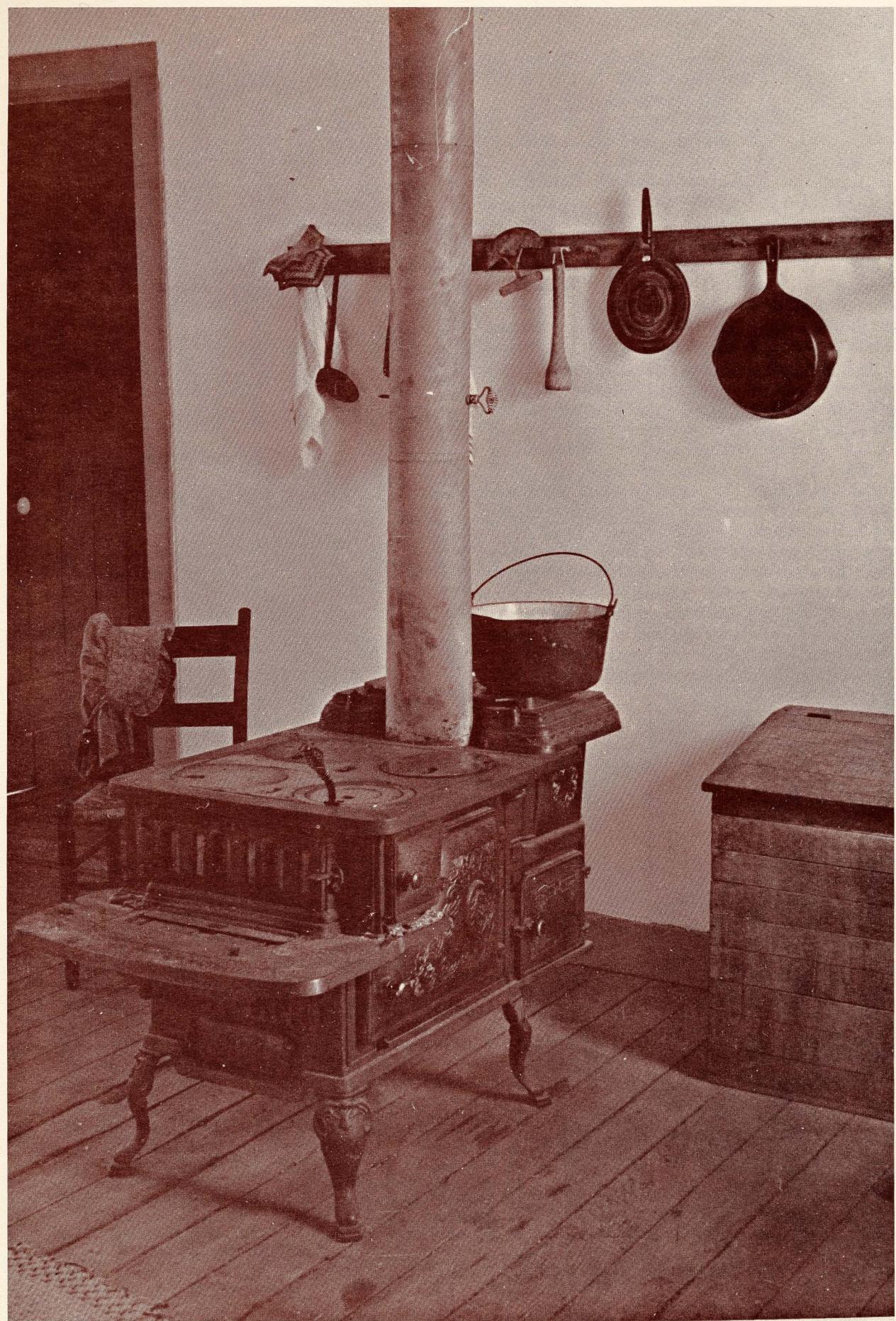


### EARLIEST PORTAGE SETTLERS

- 1 John Kilgore
- 2 Allison Kinne
- 3 Prudence Howard Wattles
- 4 Stephen Howard
- 5 Caleb Sweetland
- 6 John Howard
- 7 Isaac Brooks
- 8 Joseph Beckley
- 9 Arad Cooley
- 10 Thomas Cooley

- 11 Joseph Eastland
- 12 Daniel Cahill
- 13 Ebenezer Stone
- 14 Elijah Root
- 15 Ruel Starr
- 16 Job Meyers
- 17 William Milham
- 18 Thomas Blackmer
- 19 Otis Pitts
- 20 Samuel Crooks

- 21 Jonas Woodard
- 22 Francis Downey
- 23 Eli Harrison
- 24 Ebenezer Durkee
- 25 Henry Tuttle
- 26 Martin Lathrop
- 27 David Ingersoll
- 28 Alvin Bacon
- 29 Moses Austin
- 30 William Bishop



# 3

---

---

## How the Pioneers Lived

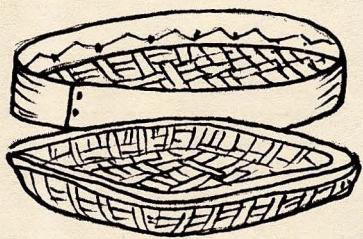
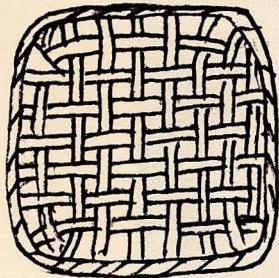
---

---

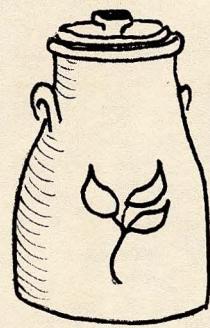
When the very first would-be Portage settlers packed their wagons for the long trip west to Michigan they knew that clothes, bedding, farm implements, cooking utensils and dishes had to take priority. The heavy quilts, hand woven blankets and linen sheets usually went into the trunks with the Sunday dress and suit. Next came the barrels filled with clothing, dishes and the small breakable stoneware jars. The larger jars were often filled with seeds, smaller tools and food for the animals and people. The plow, ax, saws, hammers and sickles were fitted in among the large iron pots, the wooden tubs and buckets and smaller wooden and tin articles used for cooking, baking and gardening. Most of the farmers brought their grindstones, as keeping their tools sharp was a prime necessity. If there were any room left a few pieces of furniture were included. These usually consisted of a few chairs, a chest of drawers, a bed and some type of homemade mattress, either corn husk or feather. Most of the men were handy with tools, and a rough wooden table, benches without backs and shelving for cupboards were often constructed during the long evenings of the first winter. The pieces of furniture that came in the covered wagon were the prize pieces of the family. Today they are valuable antiques and a few of them grace the homes of descendants of Portage pioneers.

The men of the family usually walked beside the wagon or drove the cow, sheep and pigs which followed behind. Some farmers had more than one cow; sheep were the most numerous. A few chickens, ducks and geese were usually visible at the rear of the wagon housed in rough crates. It was not unusual to see a few buckets dangling from the side and the back or a wooden wash tub tied securely to the frame.

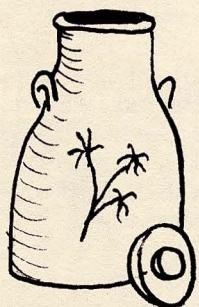
As soon as they arrived at their chosen property, the pioneers began to work, usually from daylight to dusk. The very first settlers were lucky in that their land happened to be on the prairie or on the Indian Fields. No doubt most of the land was planted in corn for that was the staple crop of the pioneers. As soon as sufficient land was cleared, buckwheat and oats were planted and later wheat. The land was excellent for raising corn which was food for both man and animals. However, preparing corn for eating took a great deal of time. In the fall it had to be picked, then all the husk had to be taken off. After that the kernels had to be removed. If the family were going to use the corn it had to be winnowed. This had to be done on a windy day so that all the chaff could blow away as the farmer slowly let the corn fall on a clean cloth laid on the grass. Sometimes women did this job. Some farmers had what they called a winnowing tray made of wood. This was a large oblong tray open on one end so that when the clean kernels fell in the tray they could be tipped into a barrel where they were stored for household use. Much of the corn was left on the cob and was stored in a corn crib near the barn. The winnowed corn was used by the family. Sometimes the kernels were ground in a coffee mill and sometimes a wooden bowl and pestle were used to make corn into meal. Cornmeal was one of the main sources of food for all early pioneers. It was made into cornmeal mush, corncakes and corn bread usually called "Johnny-cakes." Cornmeal mush was eaten for breakfast after cooking all night in an iron pot hung over the embers in the fireplace. What was left after the morning meal was usually fried in iron skillets and eaten for lunch. Indian pudding made with cornmeal, molasses and salt made a dessert. It



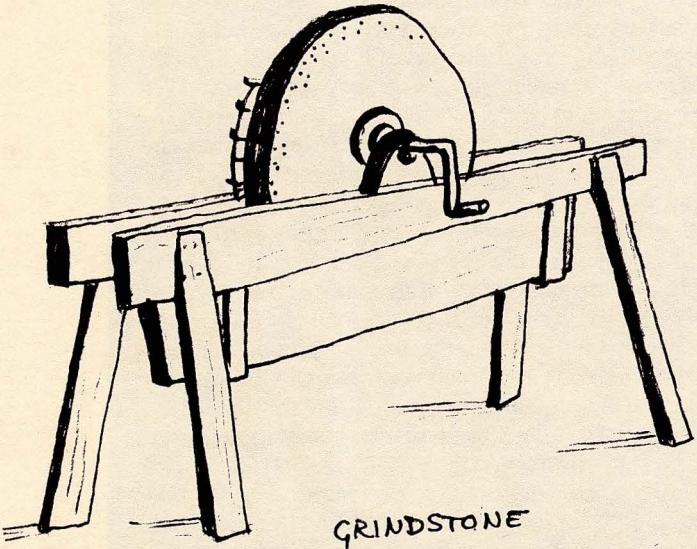
WINNOWING TRAYS



STONEWARE



POTS



GRINDSTONE

cooked all day over a very slow fire and pioneers thought it was delicious. Unfortunately molasses was not always obtainable.

By 1835 about two thirds of the northern half of Portage Township had been entered at the government land office. This land was rapidly being cleared by pioneers who planned to settle there, and most of it would be planted in corn, the staple crop. The grinding of corn by hand was of short duration. Thomas Cooley took over the gristmill on Portage Creek on the northwest corner of what is now Lover's Lane and Kilgore Road. He and his brother Arad operated this mill for several years. Besides running the mill they also farmed. It is said that the settlers in nearby farms were accustomed to carrying a sack of corn on their backs to the Cooley mill, having it ground and carrying it home again. Later the Cooleys acquired more land for farming, and Hiram Kilgore bought the gristmill.

After the country recovered from the bank failure of 1837 some of the rest of the township began to be occupied by permanent settlers, first the oak openings and then the heavily forested areas. A man could plow between the trees in the oak openings and plant some corn and potatoes. In the forested areas the settler had to clear the land of trees before it could be farmed. Many of these places were cleared by holding logging bees. The farmers who lived in the vicinity would come with their oxen and axes, wives and children and begin a day of hard labor. The much valued ax began chopping away in earnest with each farmer trying to see who could chop down the most trees. The women and children would stay in a cleared spot cooking up a good meal over the open fire and having a good visit.

As the trees were felled teams of oxen would pull them to the edge of the field where they would be put in separate piles to be used for other purposes. The branches and twigs would be burned but the logs on the whole were valuable timber. Portage was fortunate in having a great variety of oak and maple trees which were used for building purposes. There was a ready market in nearby Prairie Ronde where trees were scarce but the building of homes, stores and farm buildings was proceeding at a rapid pace. The black walnut, black cherry and hickory trees were also abundant and these were placed in a different pile. Black walnut and cherry were cherished by cabinet makers and hickory was used for all sorts of handles on tools because of its strength and durability. There were several cabinet makers in Kalamazoo village. Other wood could be used for fuel or taken into the iron smelting factory on the Kalamazoo River. At that early date iron ore was melted by using charcoal and charcoal was made of wood. It has been stated that more forest trees were used for making charcoal than for building houses.

While the logging bee was going on the whisky jug was passed around. This seemed to be a common occurrence in those days and was supposed to give the men strength. After all the trees were felled, a few games were sometimes played; but the big event came with the substantial supper. Every good thing the wife had available in her rather meager pantry was brought for this purpose. Included were roasted meats, baked potatoes, berry pies, and all kinds of corn bread; and if there were any special food obtained at the general store it would be generously shared on these special occasions. Sometimes the settlers sat around a fire and sang songs. "Yankee Doodle," "Shenendoah," "Old Dan Tucker," "Turkey in the Straw," "My Old Kentucky Home," and "Old Folks at Home" were some of their favorite songs.

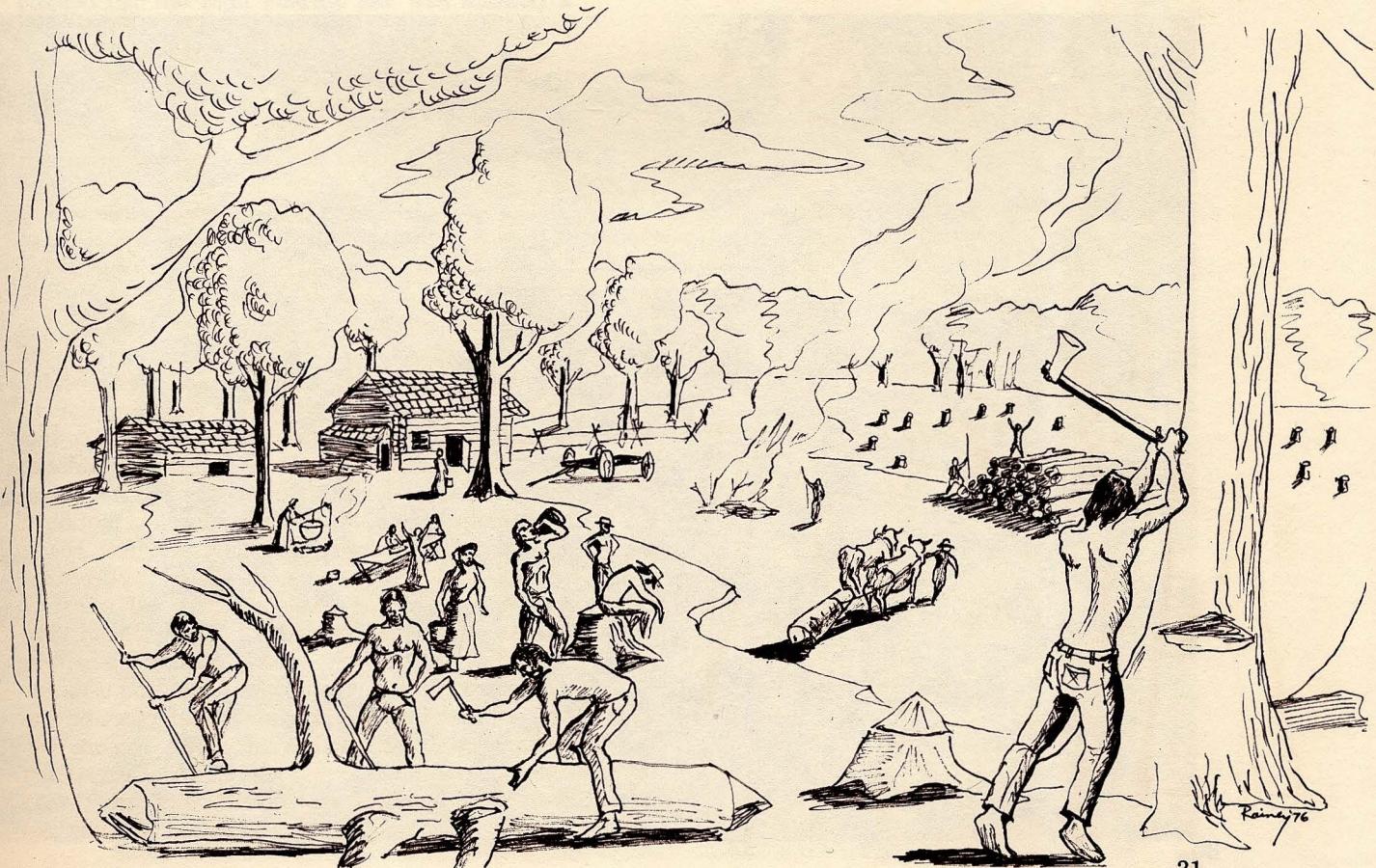
After the logging bee was over the settler had plenty of work to do. If he had not built some sort of shelter for himself this was his first job. It is rather interesting to note that many of these later settlers in Portage Township followed the example of the very first settlers and did not bring their families with them until they had some type of home ready for them. Several of them erected a

small frame house rather than a log cabin. This was no doubt due to the fact that Elijah Root in early 1834 had erected a sawmill on the west side of Portage Creek near what is now Milham Avenue. With a sawmill in such close proximity it is no wonder that few log cabins appeared on the landscape.

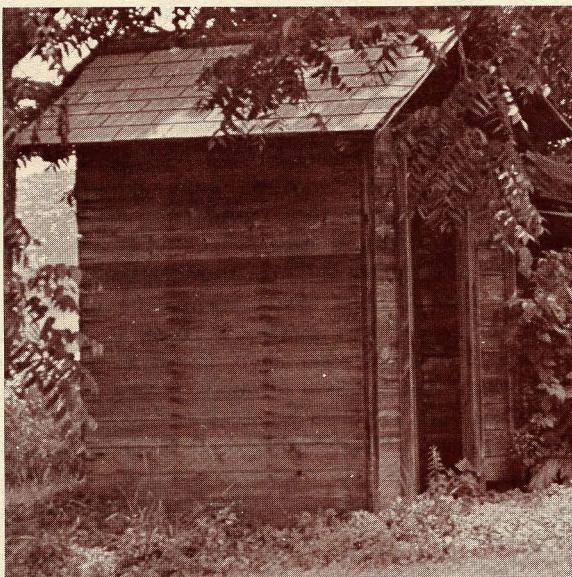
After establishing a house of one kind or another the pioneer brought his family to Portage. Since many of the very first settlers came from the same counties in New York State and were good friends or at least acquainted with one another, they helped each other. Some settlers, on arriving in Portage, would stay with relatives or friends while their houses were being built. Regardless of where they came from, most families who settled in the township were hard working and determined to improve their farms.

This was no easy task. Besides clearing the land, plowing it and getting it ready to sow the seed they brought with them, the settlers had to make provision for their animals. Every farm had to have a barn to house livestock and to store hay. Some type of chicken house had to be built and place provided for the pigs and sheep. In addition to these buildings almost every farm had a corn

Logging Bee



crib, a well or spring house, a hay rick, a tool shed, a woodshed, some type of root cellar which was often built underground near the kitchen, and an outdoor toilet called a privy. Sheep had to be fenced in to protect them from the wolves. To obtain water a well was dug and, if possible, a



pump installed. If there were no pump, a wooden bucket was lowered into the well, filled with water, and hauled up by a rope. Many of the pumps used by the pioneers were made of wood.

Erecting adequate buildings for the farm did not end the work for the farmer. In the summer there was hay to be cut, dried and stacked on a hay rick for winter use; weeds had to be cleared out of cornfields and gardens; and in the fall wheat and corn had to be harvested and potatoes had to be dug. Digging potatoes with a spade was hard work, but after they were dug the children usually went down the rows of potatoes, picked them up and put them in baskets. After they had dried out, some were kept in the root cellar and some were sold or traded at the general store or farmers' market, although in the early years not many potatoes were raised to sell or trade. The farmers' market was held every Saturday in the village of Kalamazoo at what is now known as Farmers' Alley. Behind the alley where Gilmore's Parking Lot is now located were long rows of sheds where the horses were stabled and wagons

*Root cellar on the George Howard farm on Milham Road, one of the few remaining in Kalamazoo County.*

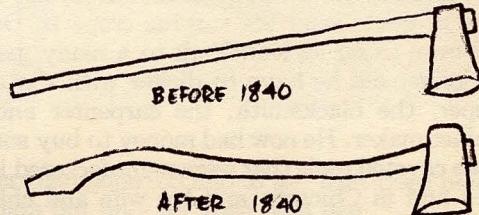


were put under cover. Here the farmers sold their wares to the villagers or they traded or dickered with other farmers for what they needed. *Dicker-* instead of trading was the word commonly used and to make a *good dicker* was a most satisfying reward to the early settlers. Wives often came with their husbands to dicker at the store or with the villagers using the eggs, butter or cheese they had brought from the farm. Some farmers' wives had steady customers for butter and eggs in the village and received cash for their wares.

Harvesting the corn was another big job. After picking it at the right time it was brought to the barn to dry sufficiently well to be husked. Corn husking brought an evening of fun and frolic. Almost everyone had a husking bee and farmers, wives and young people came in their wagons, drawn by their teams of oxen and horses, to pull the husk from the corn. Everybody worked fast because when the corn was husked the evening was spent in square dancing followed by a huge supper supplied by the housewives attending the husking bee. Participants always looked forward to finding an ear of Indian Corn. Indian Corn is the reddish brown corn or mixed yellow and brown which we use now to decorate our doors in the fall. In pioneer times finding an Indian ear gave the man a chance to kiss the girl of his choice, or if it happened to be a girl who got the colored ear the man nearest her was allowed a kiss. Of course everyone hoped to get a red ear of corn.

After the harvest was over and winter came there was still plenty of work to be done. Logs had

to be chopped for kindling and firewood, fence posts and rails had to be sawed or split for fencing and every now and then a visit had to be made to the sawmill or gristmill. Planks and boards were needed for repair work and additions to buildings. A sack of corn did not last long when cornmeal was in daily use. In the long winter evenings many a farmer would carve out a new handle for his ax, pitch fork, spade or shovel. Some farmers were quite clever at making simple furniture such as chairs, stools, small tables or candle stands and small chests of drawers. If not needed by the farmer these pieces of furniture were excellent for dicker. One enterprising farmer built a small building on his farm where he made barrel staves for a barrel manufacturer, called a cooper, in Kalamazoo village. Staves are long curved pieces of wood for the sides of a barrel. They are put together with hoops that are firmly fastened and a strong, thick piece of wood is fitted in for the bottom. Barrels were used to store practically everything imaginable including nails, salt, flour, fruit, root vegetables, pickles and a great many small articles that were shipped in from the East. In the 1850's there was a cooper located on Carpenters Corners.



*This rope bed with feather tick and hand woven coverlet belongs to a member of the Campbell family. These narrow beds were a luxury in early homes.*



In the early spring the farmer would start collecting maple sap from the sugar maples found in the surrounding wood lots. The syrup made from this sap and the honey obtained from his beehives were about the only satisfactions available for his sweet tooth. Sugar was expensive and a jug of molasses could not be used lavishly.

In spite of all the hard work, or because of it, the Portage Township farmer prospered. Within two decades of those first settlements two things happened that made life not only a bit easier but also more financially rewarding. First, in 1837 Cyrus McCormick moved his McCormick Reaper factory to Chicago, and after the Panic of 1837 was over began to manufacture reapers in large enough quantities to make them more available to the Michigan farmer. No longer did he have to reap everything by hand using his long handled scythe and rake. Now his horse could pull the reaper over the ground and he was able to complete the job in a fraction of the time. The McCormick reaper was first tried out in Climax Prairie where there is now an historic landmark commemorating this event.

The second event which hastened prosperity for the Portage farmer was the arrival in 1846 of the first railroad train to Kalamazoo from the East. Now he could send his surplus crops to Detroit and even as far as New York to a ready market. No longer did he have to dicker with the store-keeper, the blacksmith, the carpenter and the cabinet maker. He now had money to buy some of those coveted tools that were manufactured in the East and in Chicago; and his wife and children could afford to have some clothes from *store bought* cottons, a cook stove to use in the kitchen, and a small Franklin Stove for heating the parlor or sitting room. These stoves came into general use about 1840.

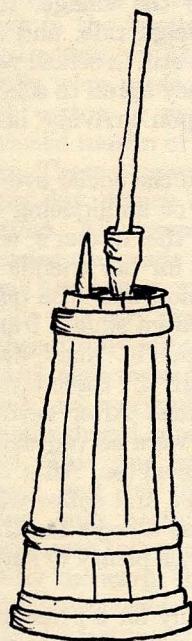
No doubt the wives welcomed cook stoves. As may well be imagined the wives of the early pioneers had a great deal to do and were busy from early morning until late at night. Cooking a meal over the coals in the fireplace was a difficult job. First, those iron pots were exceedingly heavy to lift. Then the crane had to be adjusted properly over the burning embers so the food would not burn. Finally the heavy pots and skillets had to be cleaned with water heated over the same fire. The first iron stoves were built close to the floor so stooping was still required. It was several years before a stove and oven were combined and the cooking area was raised to waist level.

Every bit of water had to be hauled or pumped out of the well and brought into the house in buckets. This was one job the children were usually required to do, but if there were not any children old enough it was the task of the wife. Then there was the washing to be done. Again the water was heated in huge iron kettles out of doors

over an open fire whenever possible. The clothes were scrubbed on a tin scrub board in a wooden tub which stood on three legs or was placed on a crude wooden bench. Soap was made in a large iron kettle over an open fire. Enough soap was usually made to keep the family supplied for several months.

Besides the daily tasks of cooking, scrubbing and getting in the water supply, the early pioneer wife fed the chickens and pigs, gathered the eggs, and milked the cow or, if they were fortunate, two or three cows. The milk was carefully strained through a cloth, then poured into large shallow tin pans in the dairy where it was left for the cream to rise until it could be skimmed off and made into butter. The buttermilk that was left was fed to the pigs. At the time of the early settlers most of the wives had a round wooden churn with a wooden paddle fastened through a hole in the top. This was thumped up and down until the cream turned to butter. Butter and eggs were both articles the farmer's wife used for dicker. She could trade these at the general store for calico, sewing





BUTTER CHURN



thread, needles, salt, sugar and, if she were lucky, some China tea or coffee beans.

Of course butter making and egg gathering went on all year long, but in the spring besides her usual chores the wife took care of the setting hens and the young chickens they hatched. These had to be watched carefully and enclosed at night in the chicken coop so that some animal on the prowl would not get away with them. In the fall she had special tasks as well. From almost the very beginning she began preserving food for winter. Cabbage was made into sauerkraut; green beans were cut and salted down in crocks; carrots, turnips and parsnips were pulled and stored in the root cellar with the potatoes and some of the late cabbages, pumpkins and squash.

When the apple trees which had been planted from almost the very beginning of the settlement began to bear, the farm wife made apple butter. Again the big iron pot was used over an open fire and the apple butter was stirred with a long wooden paddle. Other fruit that was raised on the farm was also preserved and this activity increased from year to year as sugar became more available. Apples were also dried to be used in winter. In 1836 T. W. Dunham had started a nursery. He had taken his ox team into Ohio and brought back fruit trees and berry bushes. Other

pioneers had gone to Ohio to get fruit trees before that date but only for their own use.

In winter when a pig was butchered, the pioneer wife would be busy taking care of all the meat and fat on the animal. Hams and bacon were salted and hung in the smokehouse. Hocks were salted and kept to boil with the sauerkraut. Much of the fat was fried out in the black iron kettle and the lard stored in crocks to be used for frying doughnuts, making pie crust and baking cakes. The rest was used for salt pork which was cut in slabs and placed in salt brine, the meat to be used on many a cold morning for breakfast. The meat was cut in small pieces, slowly fried very crisp and the fat used to make milk gravy or to fry any leftover boiled potatoes. The remaining meat was usually cut up and kept in a freezing place to be used when needed. The back kitchen, not used in winter, was usually cold enough to keep the meat frozen.

Whenever the farm wife had a moment to spare she was kept busy with her spinning, sewing and knitting. In the spring when the farmer sheared his sheep the wool was washed and sometimes carded; however, there were four carding mills in Kalamazoo village where the wool was usually taken to be carded. Next to nearly every fireplace or cookstove stood a spinning wheel which was

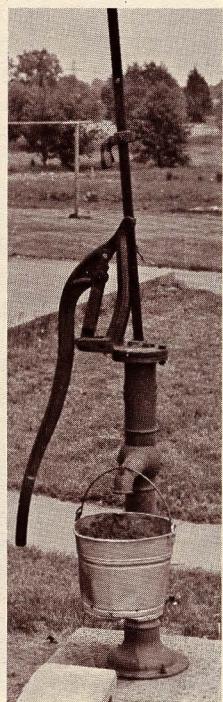
kept busy many an evening spinning the wool that would be knitted into garments or woven into material for the family. All the family wore knitted, woolen stockings or socks through the cold winter months. Men, women and children had heavy sweaters; the boys usually had knitted under vests; and the girls often wore knitted petticoats with woolen tops. Dyeing the wool was another chore for the housewife. Dyes made of elderberries or hickory nut shucks were the favorites, particularly the bluegray dye which the elderberry produced. The homespun wool was apt to be scratchy especially when worn next to the skin. Children in school would sometimes use the itching which their woolen clothing produced as an excuse to engage in excessive scratching to disrupt the lesson. Perhaps the famous *hickory stick* was used on these occasions.

All the family's other clothes were usually made at home as well, except the best suits for the men and boys. Farm women would sometimes trade certain jobs. One would sew or knit for a family while the other would weave the wool into cloth. Not too many wives had the large looms required for weaving. Other women made weaving a specialty and would weave material for five or six cents a yard. An unmarried daughter who was clever at sewing would be asked to spend several weeks with a family to do the sewing. She would receive room and board and a small amount of money. Calico dresses and aprons were usually worn by the women and girls during the summer, but woolen dresses were worn in the winter with a calico apron to keep them clean. The usual

wardrobe consisted of three dresses including one best dress for Sunday and special occasions, one second best dress to wear to the village, to a husking or sewing bee or a sleigh ride, and one dress for work. Girls who were still in school wore the second best dress and a fancy apron to school; they changed immediately upon arriving home from school.

Sewing or quilting bees were the social events for the women. After piecing or appliqueing an especially intricate quilt top, the farmer's wife would send a message around for her friends to gather at her home for a quilting bee. The quilt would then be mounted on a large square frame and beautiful, intricate designs in small even stitches would be sewed through the three layers of material pinned on the frame. After several hours of sewing, refreshments were served using the best china and the much loved tea. After the railroad came to Kalamazoo, tea and coffee were made more available, but it was always tea that was served at these functions with plenty of sugar and cream.

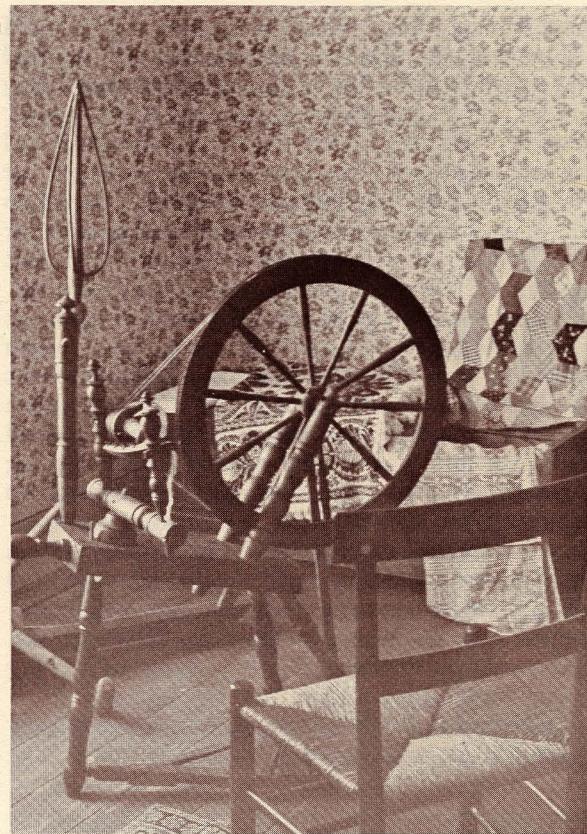
These fancy quilts were usually for a bride and the piecing or appliqueing was done before the quilting bee by the young bride and her family, with perhaps a friend or two giving a helping hand. Some of these quilts had quite imaginative names; others were named after ordinary objects in the environment. Some had more than one name, depending upon the section of the country where they were made. Quilt names include *whig rose*, *mosaic*, *flower garden*, *melon patch*, *tulip*, *nine patch*, *Ohio star*, *saw tooth*, *turkey tracks*,



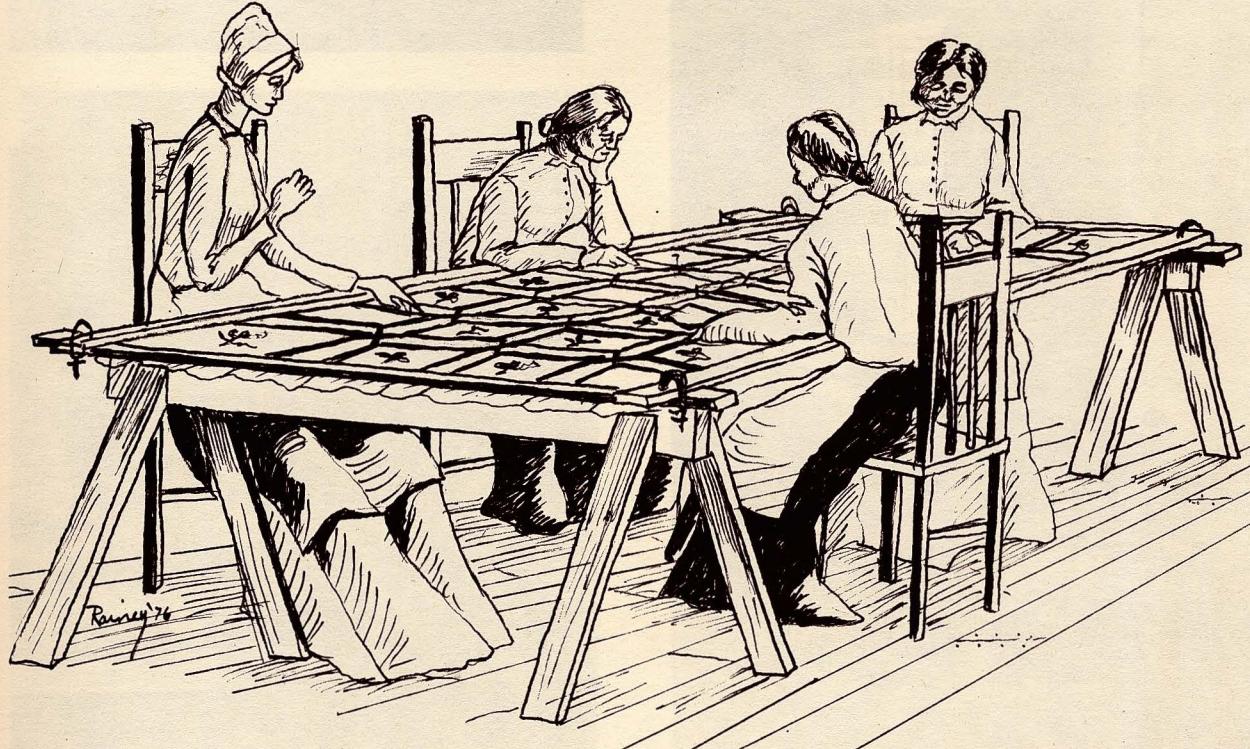
*Jacob's ladder, goose tracks, hen and chickens, morning star, duck paddle, bear tracks* and many others. Some of these quilts have been handed down in the family and may be found in quite good condition. Most of the other quilts in the family were made of ordinary patchwork, lined with cotton or wool batting, backed with unbleached muslin or tow cloth and tied with wool yarn. These were warm and practical and used for every day. Fancy quilts were used when guests arrived. All scraps of material were carefully hoarded and made into quilts; even the wool was made into heavy quilts for freezing winter nights. Calico was very precious and used in the quilts to be beautifully stitched at the quilting bees.

Although most of the farmers kept a flock of sheep, not everyone raised flax. The ones who did usually shared some of the flax with their neighbors. This was spun into linen thread, fairly heavy, and was then woven into sheets, pillow cases, quilt backings and shirts for the men. Sometimes this thread was used with wool yarn, one for the warp, the other for the woof. This was called *linsey woolsey* and gave exceptionally long wear. Unfortunately it was not very comfortable and was apt to scratch.

When clothes wore out they were never thrown away. They were torn into strips, sewed together and rolled into a large ball. When enough balls

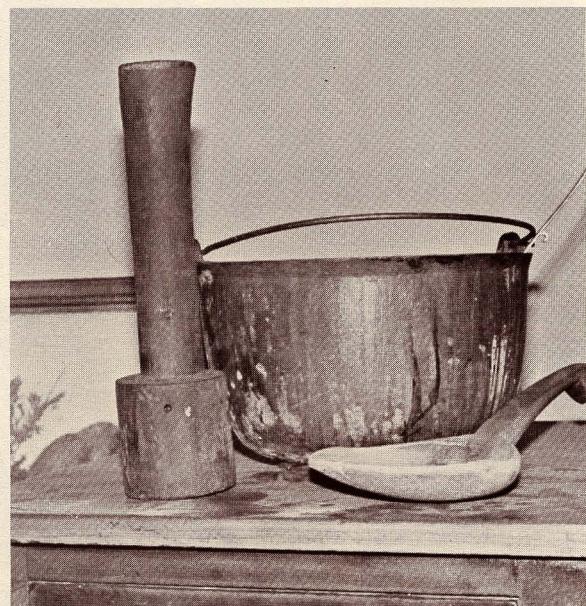
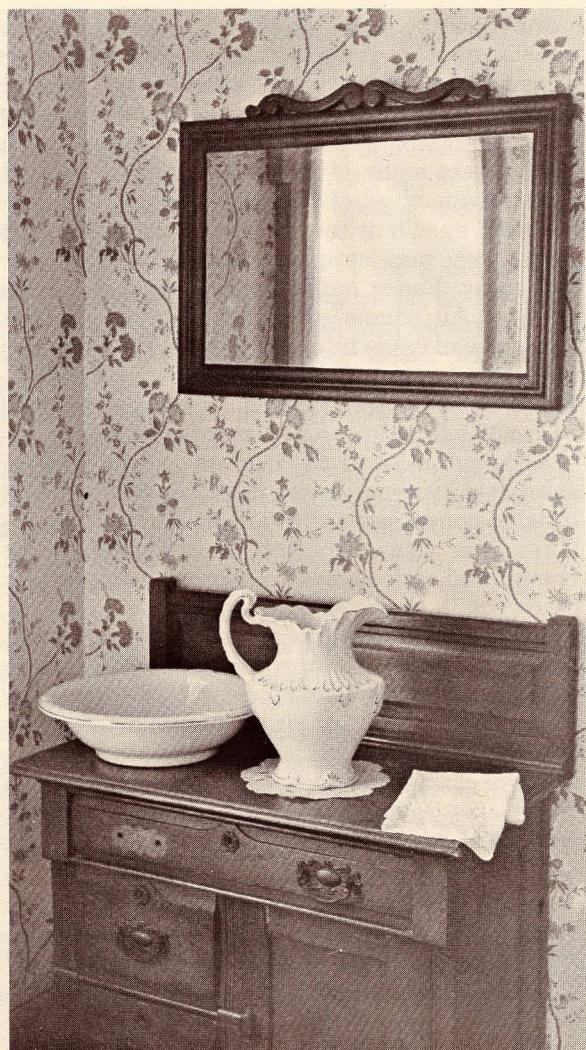


*Quilting Bee*

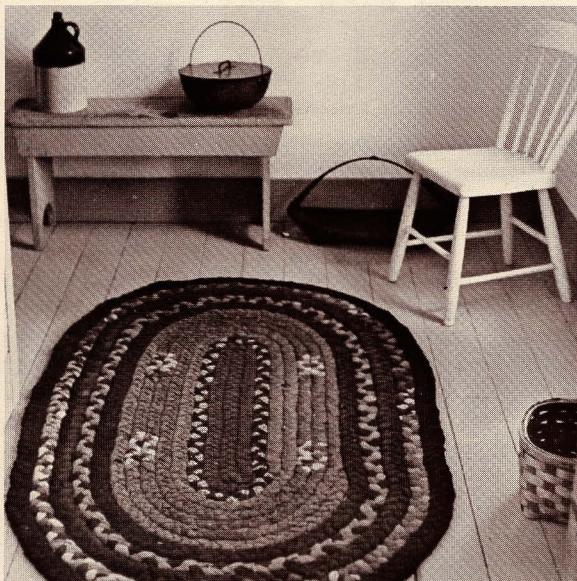


accumulated they were woven into rag rugs. If there were enough material, several strips could be sewed together into a rag carpet for the sitting room. Wool material was cut into wider strips, sewed together, folded over, then braided and sewed into rugs. These were usually in an oval or a round shape. Sometimes the oval became so large it would almost cover the sitting room or parlor floor and was especially beautiful in bright colors. The lighter pieces were often dyed red. Dyeing was done at home with vegetable and root dyes. Black walnut hulls made a rich, brown color. It was quite a feat to braid a rug and have it lie flat, and the lady of the house who had such a carpet or rug had reason to be proud. Sewing and braiding rags was usually done at home. During the winter a few farm women would sometimes get together and do some fine sewing, embroidery, crocheting or knitting. They would perform such tasks as adding some crocheted or knitted lace around the bottoms of their best petticoats, which were worn only on very special occasions. This may have been the beginning of sewing societies, and tea was always served.

If there were some small girls in the family they were taught to sew when very young. First they



learned to make very small stitches and then were given some patchwork squares to sew together. Their first embroidery was usually a sampler and they were taught to do different kinds of stitches on the sampler. Some were quite complicated and can be seen in museums. Sewing was just one of the many things the girls learned to do. They were usually called upon to peel the potatoes and other vegetables for dinner. They washed the dishes, swept the floor with their handmade, rush brooms and scrubbed the kitchen table. The tables were



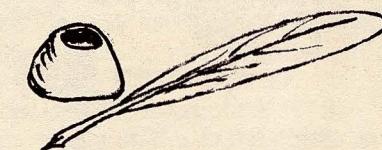
usually long and narrow with a solid oak or hard maple top from one to two inches thick. Because every housewife was proud of having an immaculate table, they had to be scrubbed hard two or three times a day.

The boys were not excused from work. At quite an early age they had to fill the wood box which was near the fireplace or behind the cookstove. The wood was kept neatly stacked in the woodshed which was usually right next to the kitchen and often attached to the house. As soon as a boy was old enough he was expected to chop the wood and kindling and stack it in the woodshed. He also kept the buckets filled with water and on wash day filled the tubs before he went off to school.

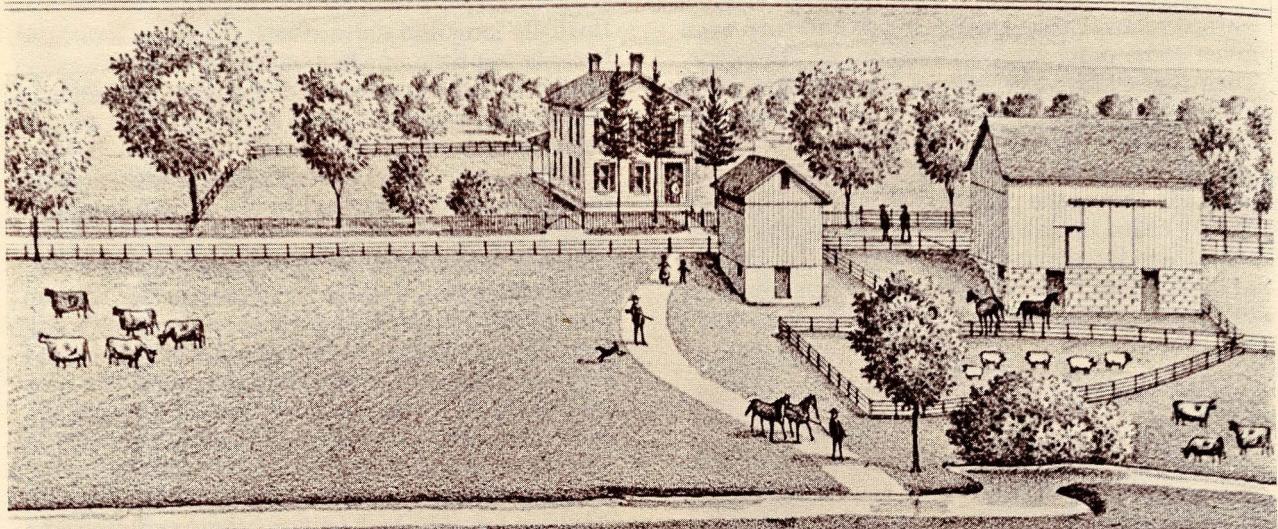
On Saturday he had a rather backbreaking and tedious job. He had to turn the handle on the grindstone while his father or older brother sharpened the tools. First came the knives, then the axes, the sickle, the scythe and sometimes the spade. The spade needed a sharp edge to cut through the rich, heavy soil of Portage Township.

In the summer both the boys and girls picked berries, helped their mother weed the garden and pulled or picked vegetables. In the fall they picked up potatoes, gathered pumpkins and squash, pulled the carrots and turnips and went to gather black walnuts, hickory nuts and acorns.

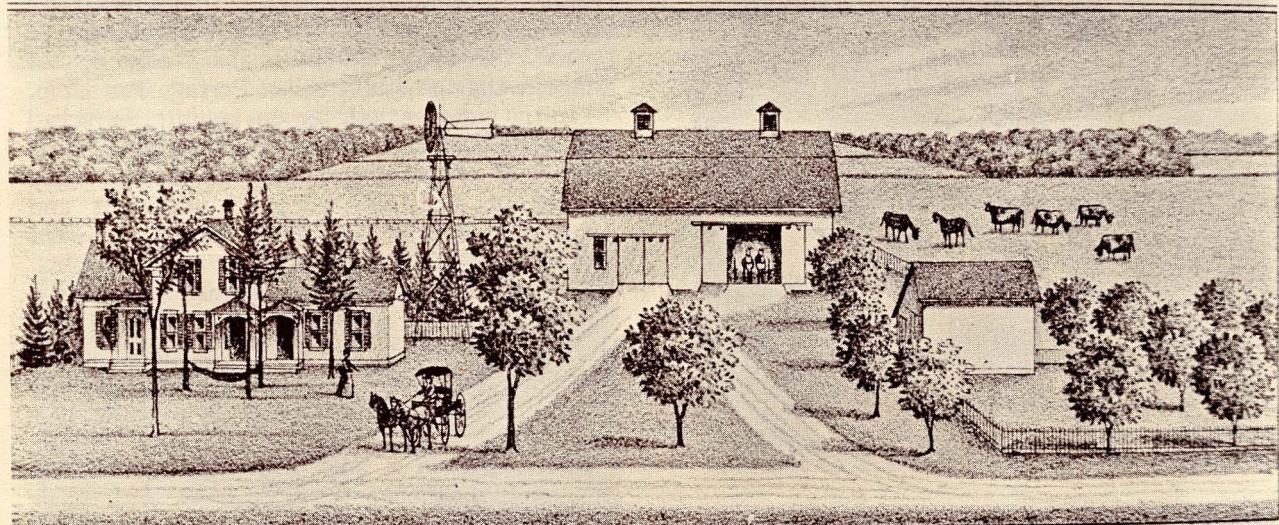
When their work was finished they could have a good time. They could go to the woods to pick wild flowers or to a nearby brook to go wading or sail their little homemade boats. It was always fun to jump in the hayloft, race around the barn with the dog, go sliding on their sleds in the winter or build a snowman. If some of the neighbors happened to come over with their parents the boys usually had some rowdy games in the barnyard, but the girls might have a make believe tea party under a shade tree or in the kitchen. Just as their parents worked very hard and then enjoyed their square dances, sleighride parties, barn raisings and husking and quilting bees, so the children enjoyed their play on the wide open space of Portage Township.



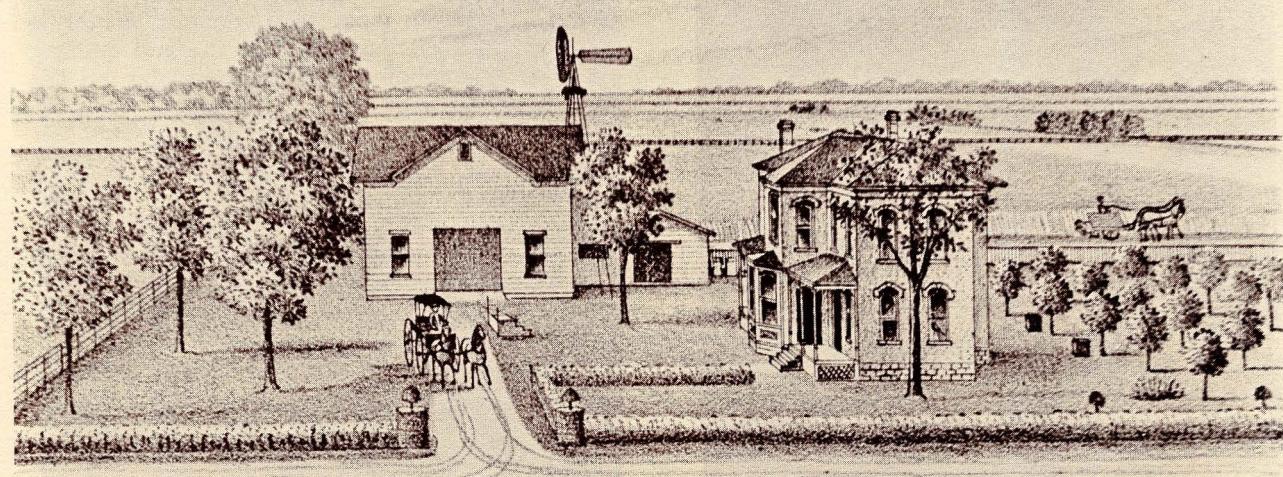
QUILL PEN & STONE INK WELL



RESIDENCE OF GEO. E. KILGORE, SEC. 3, PORTAGE TP, KALAMAZOO CO., MICH.



RESIDENCE OF GEO. A. SUTHERLAND, SEC. 5, PORTAGE TP, KALAMAZOO CO., MICH.



RESIDENCE OF IRA D. MATTESEN, SEC. 15, PORTAGE TP, KALAMAZOO CO., MICH.

# 4

---

---

## Portage Prospects

---

---

After the Civil War was over, several changes occurred in Portage. Some of the pioneer farmers began acquiring more land near their old farms; others sold their farms and bought farms in other locations. A few moved to other townships and others went farther west. Citizens in Kalamazoo were still holding land for speculation but were gradually selling to newcomers. As a rule the new farmers moving in bought farms of from forty to fifty acres. In some instances the old settlers purchased more land belonging to the government. The Van Hoesens, Bonfoeys and Mattesons all seemed to farm land in more than one section and the Cooleys farmed several pieces of land. They no longer ran the gristmill which had been purchased by John Kilgore's son, Hiram.

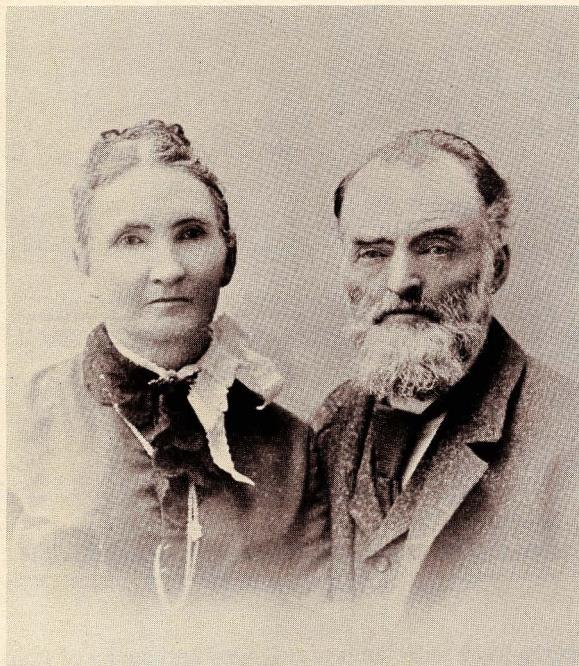
Isaac Brooks owned about 400 acres in the northwest area and Ebenezer Durkee owned over 350 acres in the center of Portage, although part of his land was not farmed. Some of Durkee's property was sold for a hotel built in 1850 by Daniel Lathrop and other pieces were sold for the railroad and railroad station and for a grain elevator.

Two large farms happened to be owned and run by sons of 1831 pioneers. In 1850, Moses Woodard's son, John, had travelled to California and after returning from a successful gold mining adventure he was able to buy 207 acres in the northeast portion of the township, including the land first purchased by his father. Moses and the rest of the family had moved to Brady Township. During the same year in which John Woodard left for California, John Gibbs, another 1831 pioneer who had entered land in southwestern Kalamazoo Township adjoining Section 6 in Portage, took his son, William, to California by ox team. They were so successful with their gold mining that they

came back with several nuggets and sacks of gold dust. John soon returned to California with another son, but William purchased 4000 acres of government land in Kansas on speculation and a large farm next to George Howard's farm in Portage Township. He then married one of the Prouty sisters from Allegan and built a substantial farmhouse on what is now Angling Road. He called his farm "Oak Grove."

Most of the families living in the northwest part of Portage were related in one way or another. For example, the Prouty sisters connected three of these families through marriage. By marrying Jennetta Prouty, Gibbs more or less joined the Howard clan which at that time occupied a good portion of the northwest area of Portage Township. Pioneer John E. Howard had brought his seven children with him when he moved to Portage. Of these children Stephen, Rossiter and Prudence seem to have been the most prominent in Portage history. Stephen and his neighbor, Allison Kinne, were related by their marriage to sisters. Stephen's daughter, Harriet, married Isaac Brooks' son, Albert; Stephen's son, George, married Pearlie Prouty; and Isaac Brooks' other son, Henry, married Galeta Prouty. Rossiter Howard lived on the farm in Section 5 also occupied by his father, John; and Prudence Howard Wattles and her sons lived on sizeable farms in Section 7. When Stephen Howard passed away, his daughter, Amanda, continued to occupy the brick home he had built in 1859. Allison Kinne's son, Henry, continued to live on the Kinne farm. Some of the homes built by these early settlers remain today on land which the early agricultural reports indicate was once very productive farm land.

Rossiter Howard was the first of the descend-



*John and Jennetta Prouty Gibbs*

ants of early pioneers to leave the northwest area of Portage when in 1862 he sold his farm to William Boylan, son of a pioneer from nearby Texas Township. Rossiter and his family moved farther west to Walla Walla, Washington. Most of the other descendants remained, some of them well into the twentieth century.

Alice Howard, the oldest living granddaughter of Stephen Howard is living in Kalamazoo. At ninety-five she has many amusing incidents to tell about her early years on the farm. Apparently her great aunt, Belva Howard, lived with her Aunt Amanda. Great Aunt Prudy lived a short distance away and some of their time was spent visiting on the front porch of Grandpa Stephen's house. They all smoked pipes and one Fourth of July Aunt Belva was induced to ride in an ox cart in the parade dressed in pioneer costume and smoking her pipe. Another fond memory is of walking over the hill to her great aunt Lydia Kinne's farm and going wading with her cousins in their creek. She and Burson Gibbs, grandson of William Gibbs, both recall going to pick the huge blackberries that grew in Mandy's Woods. For years her Aunt Amanda owned a twenty acre woodlot and allowed all the children to pick blackberries when they were ripe. Many of the trees are still standing on the property now owned by the Frizzell family on Vincent Drive and Angling Road. Mrs. Vincent, who owned the property until a few years ago, followed Amanda's example

and for many years generously shared her woods and fields with the children at nearby Angling Road School for their nature studies. The Frizzells are maintaining that tradition.

A few large barns may still be seen in the area once occupied by the Howard clan and one of the few root cellars remaining in Portage is found on the former George Howard farm in Section 6. All of the farms mentioned above along with several others including those owned by the Kilgores, Milhams, Crooks, Bacons, Beckleys, Cutlers, and Hawkins produced grain but many of their fields were also dotted with sheep. According to reports, every farmer kept a few pigs, one to six cows, some chickens and from two to four horses. Some farmers grew large amounts of corn and wheat and a few planted several acres in potatoes. Oats were popular with about a dozen farmers but only a few grew barley.

In 1880 on his 207 acre farm John Woodard raised 880 bushels of wheat, 525 bushels of corn and 110 bushels of oats besides keeping several sheep. In that same year Martin Bacon surpassed all other farmers in Portage by growing 1500 bushels of wheat, 350 bushels of corn, 300 bushels of oats and 395 bushels of barley. His farm was located on what is now Upjohn Company property.

The increase in grain production by farmers was due to the larger number of acres of cleared land and the increasing availability of farm machinery. Cyrus McCormick had moved his reaper factory to Chicago shortly before 1860, but because of a shortage of materials during the Civil War he did not begin large scale production until about 1870. Threshing machines had been invented by the 1880's and some of the farmers made a business of threshing grain. Frank Bacon, a cousin of top grain producer Martin, not only did threshing but in the spring did a considerable amount of sheep shearing. Some of the farmers did their own shearing if they had enough farm help.

William Cobb, who for several years lived on his Portage Road farm in a house which is now the Beacon Club, went into the wool business in Kalamazoo. He bought large quantities of wool from area sheep farmers and shipped it by railroad to eastern carding and weaving mills. He maintained his farm in Portage by hiring a farm manager. Some of the wool from Portage sheep was sent directly to the carding mills in Kalamazoo. Many farmers' wives continued to spin their own yarn which they dyed and knitted into stockings, socks, vests, sweaters, and caps for the entire family. Before Mr. Cobb, two other Portage farmers had gone into business in Kalamazoo. One of these was Benjamin Austin, whose Kalamazoo business ventures were described in a previous chapter. In 1846, Caleb Sweetland sold

his land to Stephen Howard and moved to Kalamazoo where he ran an implement business until he was eighty years old.

Plowing the fields had become an easier task for the Portage farmer. After coming home from the Civil War, Leroy Cahill went into the grocery business in Kalamazoo. He then opened an implement business and soon invented a plow that proved very helpful to the farmer. Called the *sulky plow*, it was pulled by a horse driven by the farmer who was seated directly behind the plow. By 1890 over 75,000 sulky plows had been sold in ten eastern and midwestern states. Soon Cahill had quite an imposing factory in Kalamazoo, but he never sold his Portage farm. It was the old farm his grandfather had bought from Arad Cooley in the 1830's. Now it is the site of Southland Mall and adjacent apartments and homes.

Daniel Cahill, Leroy's father, had grazed sheep and raised corn and wheat on the farm, but Leroy, as an absentee landlord, operated a model pig farm that was unique in Portage, which was a community of sheep farmers. Carl Snow and Herschel Kilgore remember vividly stopping often while on their way to Carpenter's Corners School to watch the pigs. Mr. Snow relates that the farm



*Alice Howard, 95 year old granddaughter of pioneer Stephen Howard*

*From an 1861 Kalamazoo County wall map*



*Res. of Stephen Howard, Portage (Sec. 7)*



Leroy Cahill's sulky plow factory in Kalamazoo.



was surrounded by a high chain fence, and outside the fence red raspberry bushes had been planted. The ground inside was covered with concrete and the pig houses were built of concrete and cement blocks. The pigs had their own private bathing pool and any visitors coming inside the gate were required to wipe their feet on a mat. Mr. Cahill must have been a most successful business man for in addition to his manufacturing and farming activities he was a director of the Cone Coupler Carriage Company, the Chicago, Kalamazoo and Saginaw Railway Company and the First National Bank and was president of the Electric Light Company. Not only did he retain ownership of the farm in Portage, but he also owned a 1600 acre ranch in Kansas.

Besides remembering the pig farm, Mr. Snow recalls that during the dry season farmers would run their wagons into the creek in order to expand the spokes of the wheels. Oakland Drive, then known as Asylum Avenue, was a narrow dusty road on a level with the creek. It was no problem to drive off the road and allow the wagon to remain in the creek for a time.

Farmers going to the village of Kalamazoo usually went by way of Carpenter's Corners, which became a center for business in the last half of the nineteenth century. In addition to the

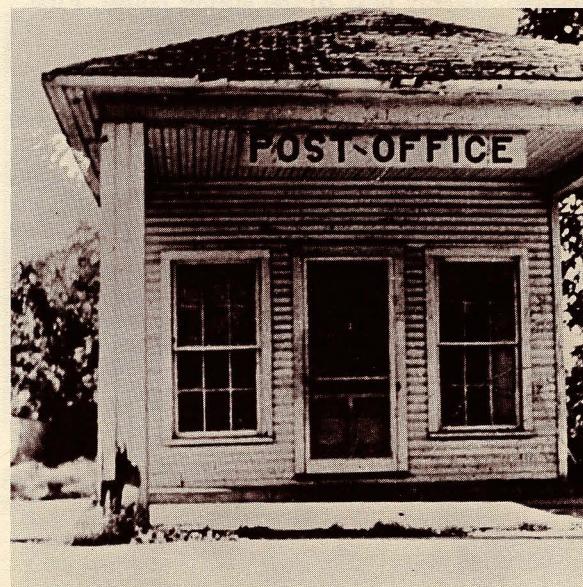
school, there was a general store, a blacksmith shop and a small tavern. The first post office for Portage Township had been established there as early as 1840. John Howard was the first postmaster in 1836 and was succeeded by Henry Tuttle after Portage became a township. Perhaps the post office was then located in the Tuttle tavern near Portage Center. Lettie Matteson served the longest term in the post office as postmistress in the 1920's and again in the 1940's. She and her Portage born husband, Porter, raised a family of ten in Portage, where Lettie was also a teacher and Porter one of the original school bus drivers as well as a carpenter by trade. The post office was housed in several different buildings through the years and is now located in Portage Plaza.

Portage farmers seem to have been inclined toward business ventures. In 1863 the Kalamazoo County Farmers Mutual Insurance Company was organized with five Portage farmers among the eight incorporators including John Milham, Samuel Crooks, William Trumbull, Isaac Cox, and Joseph Beckley. Originally the membership numbered 132 county residents including thirty Portage farmers. After the Civil War the company began to grow. By 1890 the membership had increased to over 8,850 and the value of the policies well exceeded \$4,514,350. At this time Richard Sykes, early Portage settler, was secretary and treasurer, and because of the pressure of business he sold his farm to devote full time to the company.

Throughout the last three decades of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, a small number of farmers remained in the old homesteads, improved their land, added to their stock, modernized their homes to some extent and were active in the political and social circles of the community. During the first two or three decades of the twentieth century, some of the larger farms, particularly those along the northern portion of Westnedge Avenue, were divided into very small tracts. Most of these small farms were occupied by families with business and professional connections in Kalamazoo. In going over old records and contacting descendants of early Portage residents, it is surprising to learn how many went into the teaching profession. Some followed other professions and several chose careers in banking or real estate. Two papermills were established by Portage men, both direct descendants of pioneer Joseph Beckley. Irving Milham founded the Bryant mill and Louis Sutherland established the mill now owned by the Brown Company. The Boylan family, prominent in the automobile business in Kalamazoo for many years, still owns considerable acreage in Portage. For years it was farmed by the William Bishops, but much of it was sold to the Episcopal

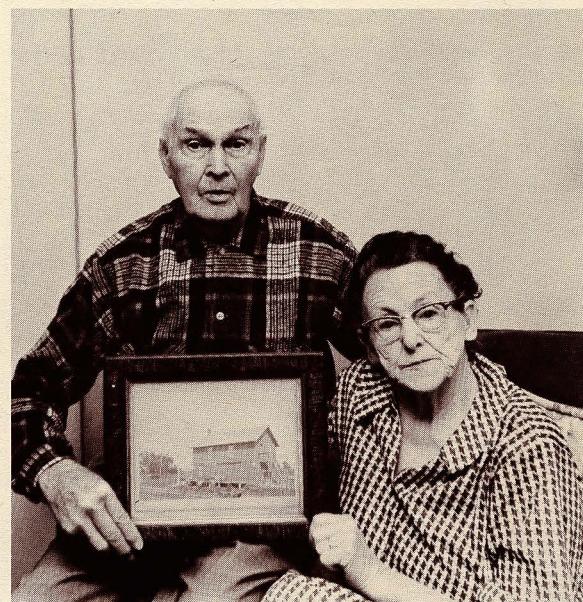
cathedral and to the state for the construction of I-94 highway. The home, still standing on the Angling Road property, was built by the Howard family, one of the earliest pioneer families, before it was purchased by the Boylans. The Greek Revival structure is certainly one of Portage's oldest and most historic homes.

The farmers who remained in Portage availed themselves of modern machinery and equipment



*An old Portage post office which was on Shaver Road at Westnedge.*

*Porter and Lettie Matteson in later years.*



as they were developed. Tractors pulled the heavy farm machinery; cars and trucks began to take the place of buggies and wagons; tall silos appeared next to barns; and riding instead of work horses were sometimes seen in the pastures. The wives of the farmers also benefited from modern inventions. Although there was still a great deal of work to do, the coming of the windmill eased the job of obtaining water for many farm duties. In photographs of the farm homes of this era, there is always a windmill pictured, usually next to the spring house. First made on a wooden frame and later constructed of steel, they shouldered an important share of the workload of both the farmer and his wife. Many windmills were made in Kalamazoo, where in 1884 there were fourteen windmill factories selling their products in Michigan and other states. John

Woodard was part owner of one factory.

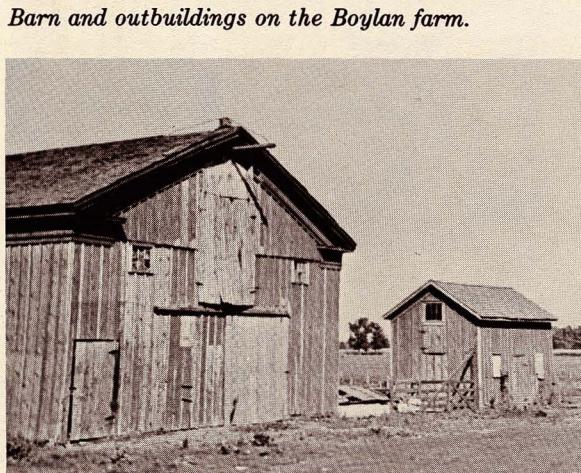
Cook stoves became available and new cooking equipment took the place of the heavy iron kettles. The first stoves were built close to the floor so that much stooping was still required. The oven was located on one side and food was often burned from an overheated oven. With improvements in design, it was soon possible to buy a stove with the oven beneath the cooking surface which raised that surface to a more comfortable height. Next came the addition of a reservoir on the side to provide a source of ready hot water. Small heating stoves appeared shortly before cook stoves and these, too, were improved constantly until the tall coal stoves with isinglass windows were developed.

The existence of flour mills in the area made it possible for wives to improve their baking skills. No longer were they dependent on cornmeal alone, but they could have their own wheat milled into white flour or buy it by the barrel from the mill. Every week large loaves of bread appeared from the ovens and cakes, pies and cookies were baked by the housewife. At church suppers, picnics and family gatherings, baking skills seemed to have been prized accomplishments. When county fairs began, it was usually the farmers' wives who walked off with the coveted prizes.

Making butter was another accomplishment of the housewife. Although most Portage farmers



*The Herbert Boylan family on the side porch of the Boylan home on Angling Road — ca. 1897.*



*Barn and outbuildings on the Boylan farm.*



kept an average of three or four cows, a few had as many as seven or eight. The agricultural reports of 1880 to 1900 indicate that most wives churned an average of 200 to 300 pounds of butter a year. A few exceeded this. In 1880 Mrs. John Hawkins made 400 pounds and Mrs. William Milham made 500 pounds. Any butter and eggs not used in the household were sold to families in Kalamazoo or traded at the general store, and the proceeds were usually allotted to the women of the family.

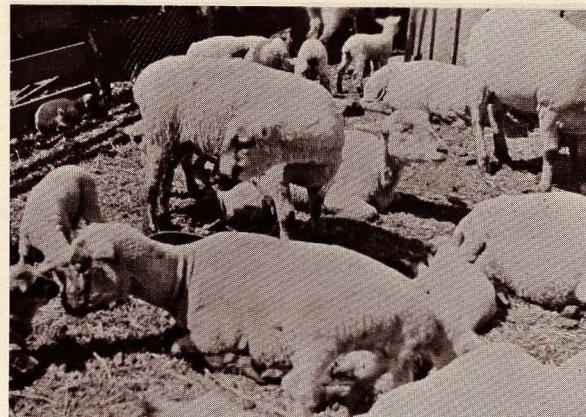
During this period many farmers enlarged their homes or built new ones. No doubt much of the butter and egg money was spent on home furnishings and equipment. Heavy mahogany and cherry furniture was fashionable and the carved horsehair sofa and chairs were prized possessions. Large flowered Axminster rugs and elaborate lace curtains made a background for the furniture. Hand crocheted or knitted antimacassars graced the backs of chairs and heavily framed pictures adorned the walls. Dishes were being manufactured in the United States and many were imported from England. Glassware was made all along the Ohio River and was available in Michigan. Now valued by antique collectors, glass items were favorite wedding gifts at the turn of the century. China cabinets were often part of the dining room furniture and here the glassware and china were displayed. Bedroom furniture was large and heavy, and in the guest room the washstand displayed an elaborately decorated chamber set which included a pitcher, washbowl, soap dish and sometimes other pieces. Plain white crockery sets were used at times in the other bedrooms, but in general the family used a tin basin in the kitchen sink for the morning wash.

In 1872 a printed flyer somewhat like a small newspaper first appeared advertising farm equipment that could be ordered and mailed directly to the home. An almost instant success, the flyer grew into the Montgomery Ward and Company catalog. It was joined in the next decade by the Sears Roebuck and Company catalog, and together they became valuable adjuncts to every farmer's home. On cold winter evenings as family members sat around the coal stove, they could peruse the catalogs, often by the light of an elaborate oil lamp. Although few families were without their catalogs, some farm and home equipment was bought not by mail but from the farm implement concerns and furniture stores in Kalamazoo.

A series of new work-saving devices for the home became available, such as the sewing machine, the first models turned by hand and later the treadle type where feet were used leaving both hands free to guide the material. Next came the washing machine, first rocked back and forth by a handle and later made to resemble a wooden tub with a plunger inside that had a handle

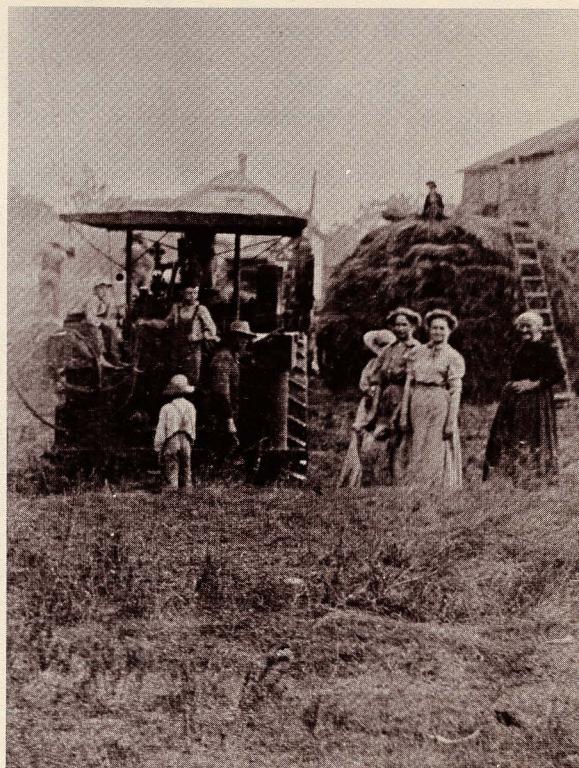
attached to whirl it around. Turning the handle was done by hand but that was much easier than standing over a tub and scrubbing each piece separately on a scrub board. Still later the ice box came into production and much ice for Portage families was supplied by the Osterhouts. Many families had their own icehouses and cutting ice on the Portage lakes was a yearly task.

From the very beginning of the settlement as



*Many sheep were raised on early Portage farms. This picture was taken on the Boylan farm.*

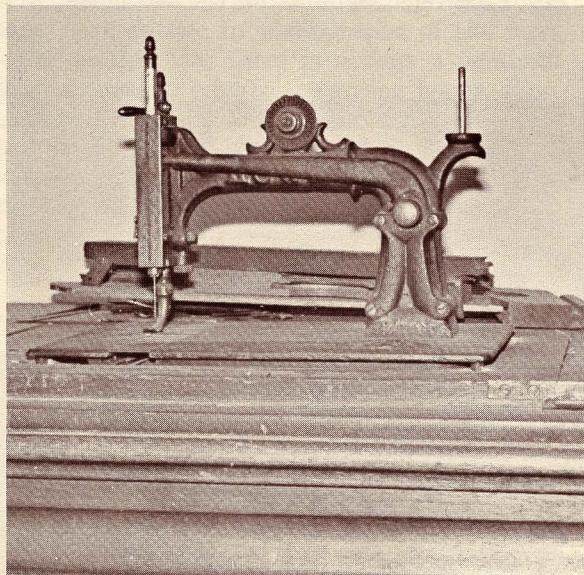
*Mechanization comes to the Peter Timmer farm.*



well as in later years, there was considerable intermarriage among the early pioneer families so that many of them were related. Most members tended to stay in the area, but a few moved to nearby Kalamazoo, Vicksburg and Schoolcraft or towns even further afield. In old letters and

reminiscences of a bygone era the writers relate stories of visits made to one another's homes. Perhaps such visits took place on a Sunday afternoon; sometimes a whole day was spent. In the spring, summer and fall, the family traveled the muddy or dusty roads in a horse drawn carriage or buggy. In the spring the trees were leafing out, wild flowers grew along the roads and in the wood lots, and sheep grazed in the fields while their lambs gamboled about. In the fall, the fields were filled with mature corn stalks and wheat and oats just beginning to ripen. In winter the sleigh or cutter was used, and nestled under a warm buffalo robe the occupants looked out at the snow covered fields.

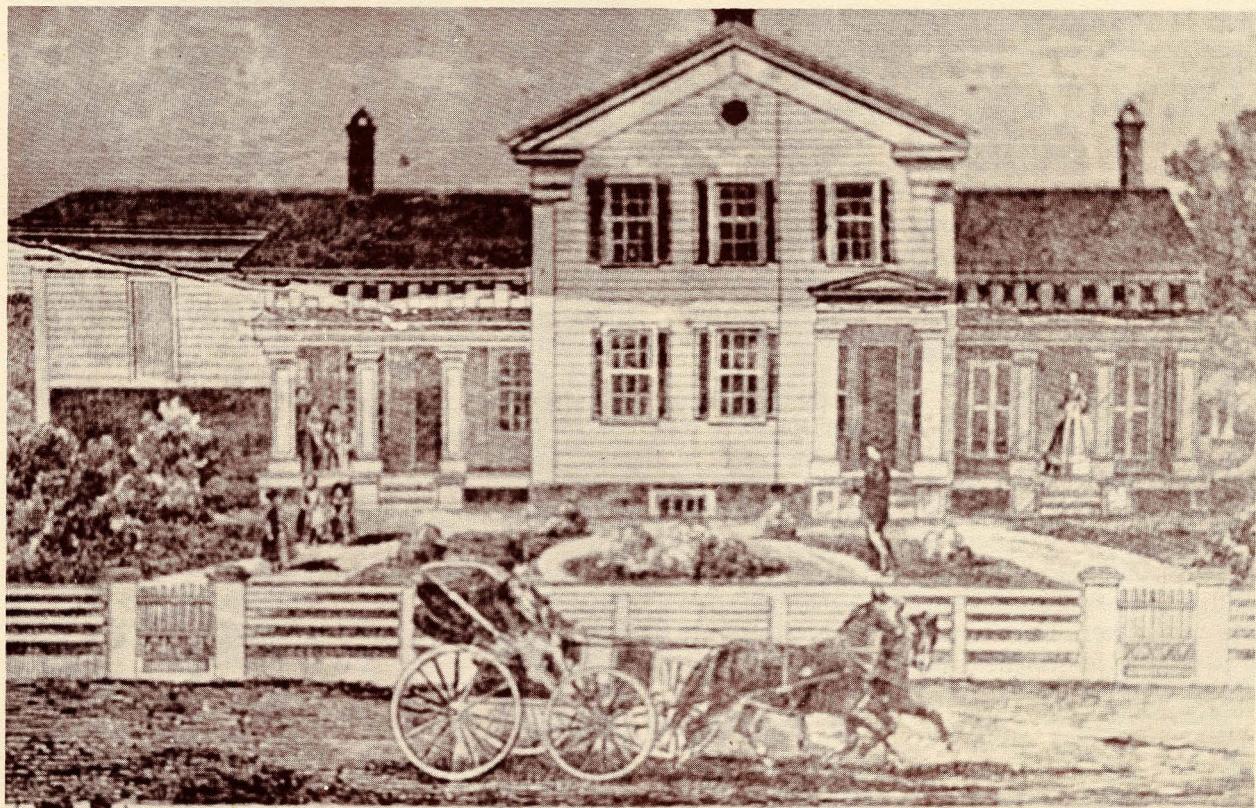
No doubt the men discussed the crops being raised, an addition to one of the farm buildings, a new piece of farm equipment, or the purchase of a



*Opposite: The Beacon Club as it was pictured on an 1861 county wall map and in the twentieth century when it was the Carney residence.*

*From an 1861 Kalamazoo County Wall map*



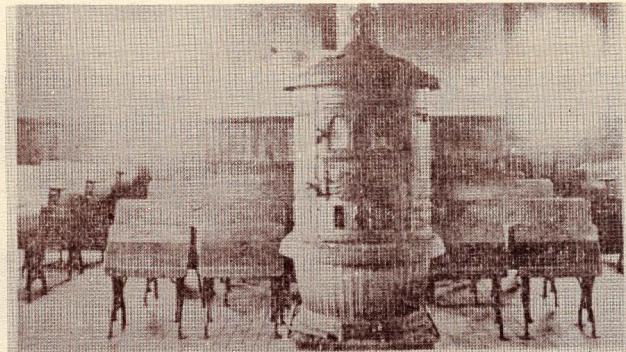


Res. of Jefferson Smith, Portage (Sec. 2)



new horse or cow. The women had their own interests. There were always new recipes to be discussed, new quilts or clothes to be admired, or a quilting bee to be planned to finish a new quilt for a future bride.

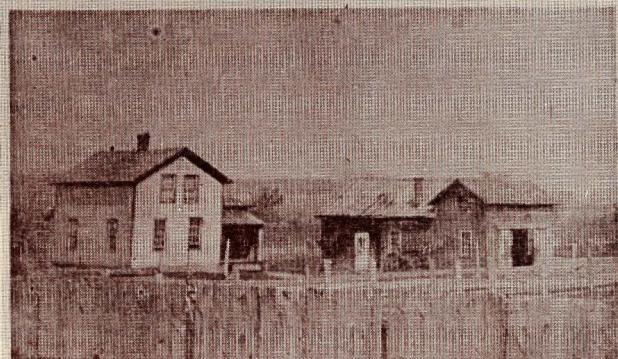
As the twentieth century progressed, further changes began to take place. With the availability of electricity the ice box and hand worked washing machine were outmoded. They were replaced by the refrigerator and the electric washing machine; the electric sewing machine and countless other appliances were developed. In many instances whole farms disappeared. At first they were divided into small holdings, but later farms were subdivided into lots; and houses were built. Many of the first individual houses in Portage were built around the lakes as summer cottages. Later the northern portion of the township began to be platted into individual lots and numerous houses were built. Today farm land is still disappearing and sheep, lambs and milk cows are rarely seen. Now and then a few steers are fattened and few chickens kept, but Portage as an agricultural community belongs to the past.



*Portage at Turn of Century*

The recent tabloid section of the Gazette devoted to the new city of Portage has brought a number of "new" old pictures to the Gazette from people who had read the historical account of the community. At top is a picture taken inside Portage School No. 5, the brick school which was illustrated in the

tabloid. The date 1900 is inscribed on the back of the pictures. The picture below is described on the back only as "Blacksmith Shop - Residence, Portage Center - From My Window." No date nor additional location is given but it may be recognized by some Portage old-timer.

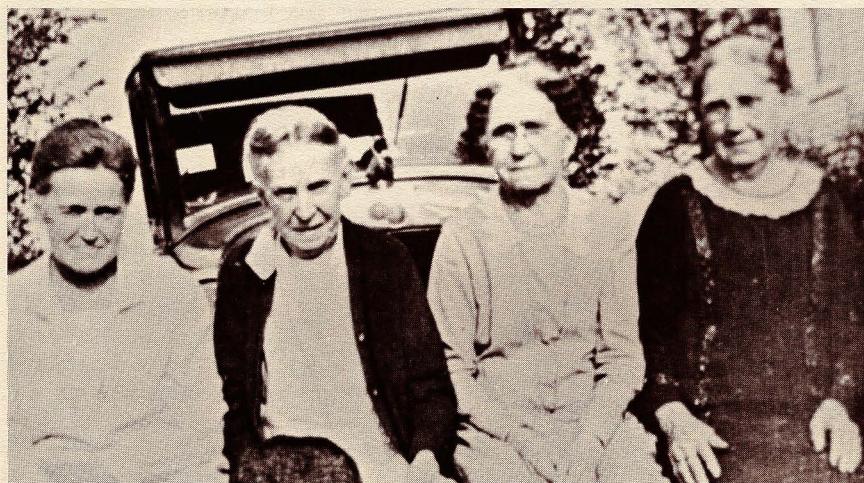


*A gathering of Portage residents in the 1880's - 1890's.*





*The Smith family on their Portage farm.*



*The Thompson sisters - Nett, Nell, Minnie and Kate - ca. 1915.*



*Mr. and Mrs. Scott Ingersoll and sons Clayton and Glenn - 1900.*



Don Southwell on the porch of the Portage Grocery Company advertising Portage celery - 1907.

# 5

---

---

## The Swampland Becomes Valuable

---

---

As the nineteenth century came to a close, a different type of farmer came to Portage. Land that had been more or less ignored by the sheep, corn and wheat farmers began to have a special interest for a group of people who had formerly farmed on swampland in Kalamazoo. For a number of years growing and shipping celery had been a leading enterprise in the city and just beyond the city limits, so much so, in fact, that it was often called the Celery City. Some of the families that came to Portage had rented muck land in Kalamazoo, some had worked for celery farmers and few had been former farm workers in the Netherlands. By the turn of the century the names Cramer, Timmer, Dakema, DeVries, Dontje, Nederhoed, Oudeman, Penning, Schuring, Vermeulen, Vroegindewey, Kannegieter and Wenke appeared on the tax rolls. All were good Holland names and evidently they were all interested in growing celery as their land was located on the marsh land in Portage.

Although it was a Scotsman who grew the first celery in Kalamazoo in 1856, it was a Hollander by the name of Lendert DeBry who drained and spaded a small piece of marsh land and grew the first celery successfully on drained muck land. The next year four or five other Hollanders prepared some of the wet and peaty soil and the business was launched commercially. By 1900 the Dutch in Kalamazoo controlled the celery market as growers and shippers and over 3000 acres were in production. There were over 200 growers and about 25 shippers. Some of the shippers grew and shipped their own celery whereas the big shippers bought from the growers and shipped to the big hotels in the larger cities. Some of these shippers became very wealthy men.

When the first celery growers appeared in Portage no easy task awaited them. Draining a marsh and making it suitable for planting celery

called for grueling, back breaking work. Although the acreage required to grow a successful and paying crop of celery was far less than needed for general farming, the work required was difficult indeed. To drain the land, long ditches, anywhere from ten to fifteen feet apart, had to be dug by hand all across the fields. It was imperative that the ditches be deep enough and placed in the right position for proper drainage. After the ditches were dug in straight even rows, the space between the ditches had to be cleared by hand, grubbing out the coarse grass, sedges, weeds and bushes. After this was accomplished the marsh had to be drained sufficiently so it could be plowed, cultivated and fertilized. Sometimes the soil was so moist it had to be spaded by hand. This was only the beginning.

Before any celery plants could be grown a greenhouse had to be built near the farm, usually directly behind the home. Many of these early celery growers had to have a home and greenhouse built while they were draining their acres of marsh land. Many of them drained only part of the land at first so they could raise a crop as soon as possible to support their families.

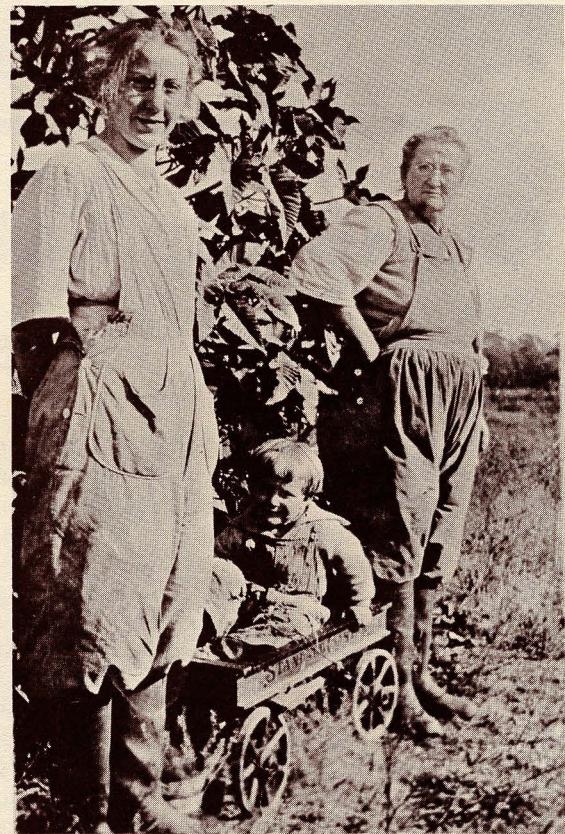
Growing the celery crop began in late February or early March. First the seed was sprouted in shallow tin pans, kept warm near a stove or furnace and watched closely by the farmer. The soil had to be kept moist and at a fairly even temperature. As soon as the seed was sprouted it was transferred to the greenhouse. In those early days the greenhouse was quite a simple affair kept warm by wood and coal burning stoves. If the weather happened to be very cold when the plants were still small the farmer would have to get up during the night to add fuel to the stove. The soil had to be kept moist until the plants were ready to go outdoors.

In the spring, after the danger of frost was

passed and the plants were from two to three inches high, they were carefully plucked from the soil, set upright in shallow pans and transferred to the shallow trenches which the celery grower had prepared. These trenches usually extended the length of the field and were about three inches deep and far enough apart so there was enough room for the farmer to walk between the rows to cultivate the soil. Anyone growing celery took great pride in keeping these rows as straight as an arrow. To get these straight rows a ball of twine was attached to a short stick at one end and stretched across the field to the opposite end, and then the trench was dug with a sharp pointed hoe. An artist's eye for straightness was needed when the trenches were dug. The first planting usually occurred about mid-May.

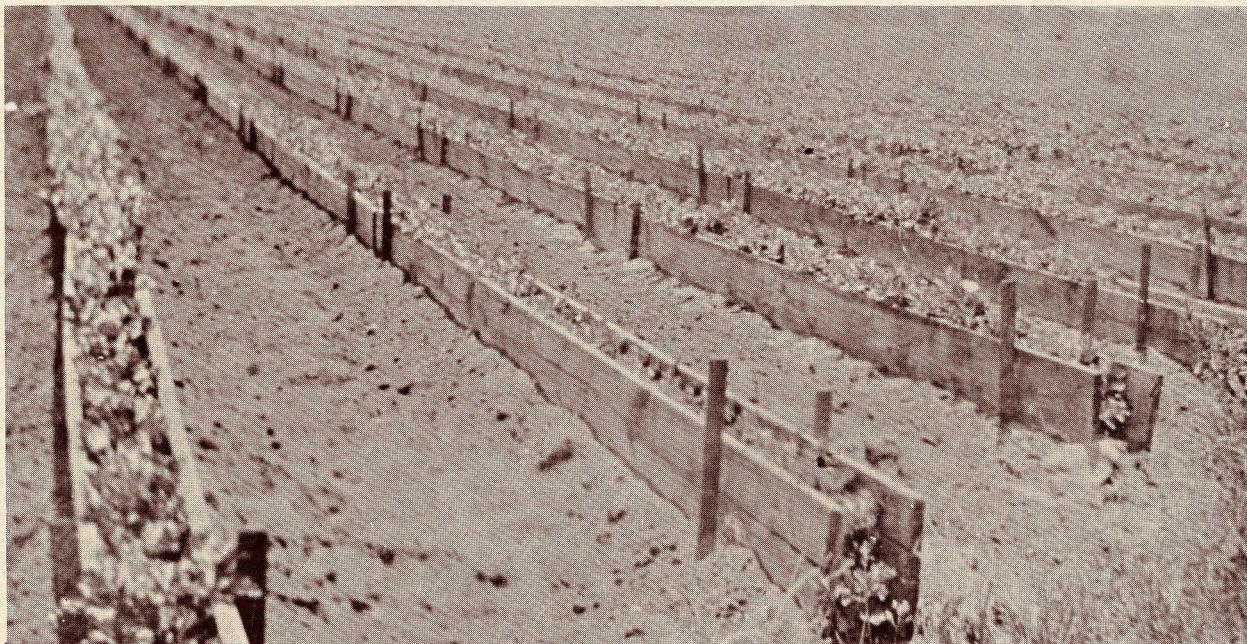
Each little plant was put in separately and a back breaking job this was for the grower. Crawling along on his knees he firmly placed each plant in the trench about five to six inches apart. It was an art to be a good planter. The soil and plants had to be in just the right condition and each plant had to have the soil pressed closely around the roots. As the plants grew the long rows had to be kept free from weeds. Once again the farmer or his helper crept along each row and carefully removed weeds that grew between the plants. This was often done by young boys, either sons of the celery grower or hired help. They had to be instructed carefully how to do this job. Carelessness would harm the plants and cause them to wilt. A cultivator was run between the

rows to keep weeds down. Growing celery was usually a family affair and the more there were in a family the more celery one could grow and sell.



*Work in the celery fields was a family affair.*

*Bleaching boards in place.*



When the tiny plants reached a certain height, long boards were placed on each side of the growing plants, held together by clamps or hooks. This would blanch the celery to snowy whiteness and would cause the heart to more fully develop. Blanching took about three weeks, and the farmer hoped for favorable weather so he could begin his first harvest in the beginning of July.

Every farmer had to have what was called a celery shed. This was a small building separate from his barn. In the shed were two long tanks with a pump at one end which filled the tanks daily with clean water. After the farmer undid the hooks that held the planks together he began to pull up the bunches of celery and trim off the roots and the outer stalks with a sharp knife. He then placed them in a wheelbarrow and as soon as it was filled he wheeled it into the shed and put the celery into the first tank. Here help usually awaited him. It was often an adolescent son or daughter, sometimes his wife or hired help if there were no one in the family able to help him. The farmer returned to the field for more celery and the helpers got busy. The stalks were scrubbed clean with a hand brush in the first tank, rinsed in the second one and then placed on a long shelf to be tied into bunches of twelve called *dozens*. The

celery was placed carefully between a rounded frame and then tied securely with twine just below the leaves and again above the roots. It was then ready to be taken to a shipper. At other times, celery was packed in wooden boxes known as *squares*, *highballs* or *flats*, made expressly for this purpose.

After the required amount of celery for the day was removed the boards were carried to one side and piled in neat piles. As the first crop was harvested, the soil was readied for a second planting which was done in between the original rows. This was a busy time indeed. In the very early dawn rows of celery would be harvested and taken to the shipping agencies or express trains,

*Celery coquette.*



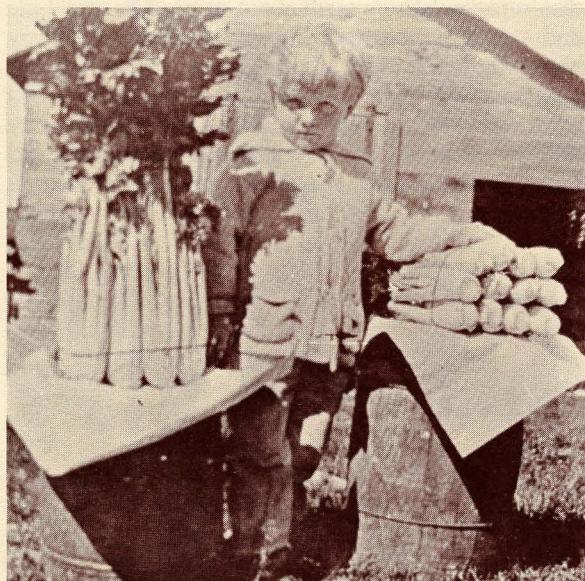
*Harvest time in the celery field.*

*Lonely celery shed still stands on South Westnedge.*



and the rest of the day would be spent in plowing, trenching, planting, weeding, placing of boards on newly matured stalks and getting ready for the next day's work.

Jennie Medema at age 93 recalls how she and her husband would get up at two o'clock in the



*Don'tje celery ready for market.*

*Harvest time in the celery field.*



morning and working by lantern light would start digging up the bunches of celery. At daybreak her sons, when they were old enough, would get up to wash and rinse the celery, getting it ready to tie into bunches.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century practically all the marshland in Portage was drained and prepared for growing celery. In the spring some of the growers supplemented their income by growing a few tomato, cabbage and cauliflower plants to sell locally, but the majority raised only celery. In the late 1920's a few started experimenting with pansies for early spring sales.

At first the celery was shipped to other cities by train. The celery farmer had to get the celery to the shippers in time to meet the train schedule. If he shipped directly to the hotels or dealers, the celery had to be boxed or crated and labeled before being taken to the train. Since these were the days before refrigerated cars the Osterhouts and Bacons cut ice during the winter from Gourdneck and West Lakes and supplied much of the ice for the cars. George Bacon actually converted a good sized log cabin on his property into an ice house.

With coming of the automobile all this was changed. When trucks came into general use some of the celery growers acquired trucks and transported hundreds of bunches of celery at a time to nearby midwestern cities. However, another change soon took place. A new type of celery appeared on the market. For years the so called White Plume variety was a prime favorite. It was

crisp, could be bleached very white and kept its freshness well. With the coming of commercial fertilizers this particular kind of celery developed a rust condition that spoiled its pristine whiteness. Since horses were used less and less, sufficient manure was hard to come by so chemical fertilizer had to be used. The new variety of celery was being grown very successfully in California. It was called pascal, the kind of celery we are so familiar with today. Besides being free from rust it was more easily grown and did not need boards to bleach it.

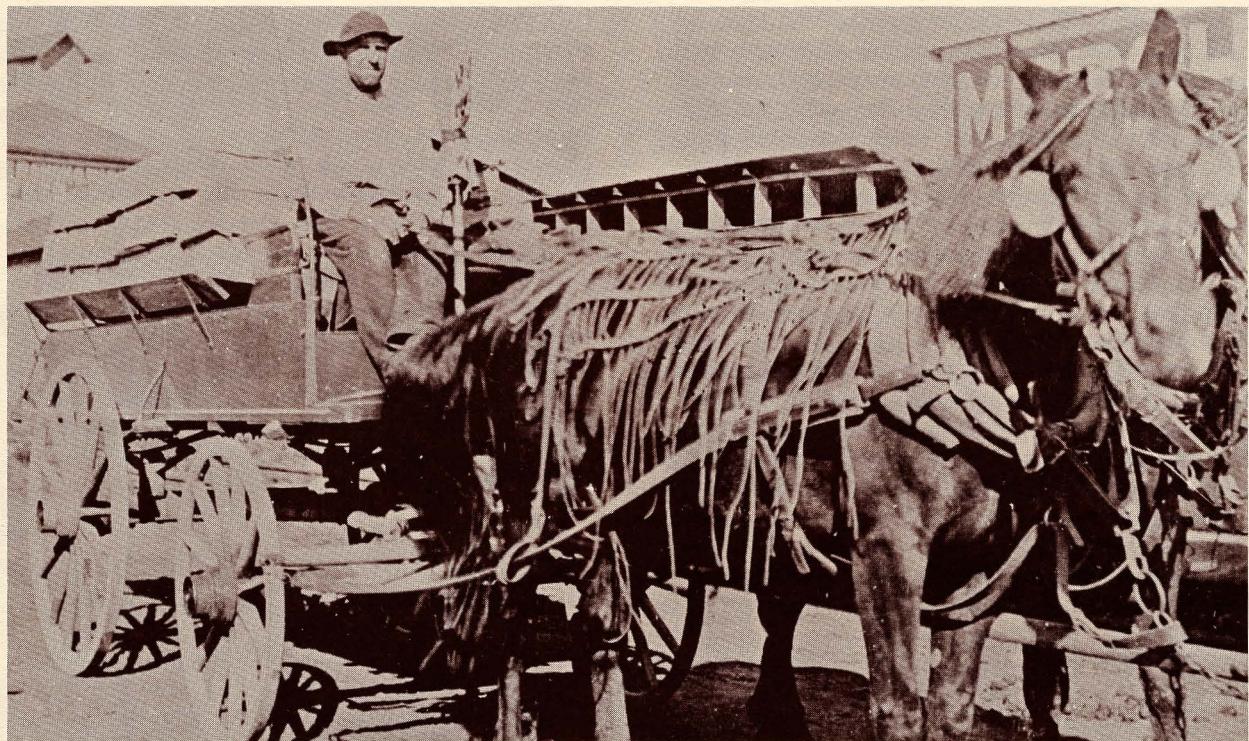
There was a wide variety of other changes which contributed to a gradual decrease in celery farming in Portage, including some more general changes in the society at large. In order to maintain a profitable operation, the farmer needed

to buy more muck land as well as the mechanized equipment required to farm the larger area. Some of the muck land began to dry out to the extent that it needed some type of irrigation during the summer. Then, too, some of the older celery growers began to think about retiring and their children did not particularly care to assume the role of celery farmer. The vast social upheaval of World War II was an important influence on the young people as, indeed, it was on the whole society. Gradually some of the earlier farmers began to dispose of their holdings. Some left Portage altogether; some retired in their homes which lined Westnedge Avenue from Milham to Centre Avenues and Centre Avenue from Oakland Drive to Portage Road; and some went into other businesses.



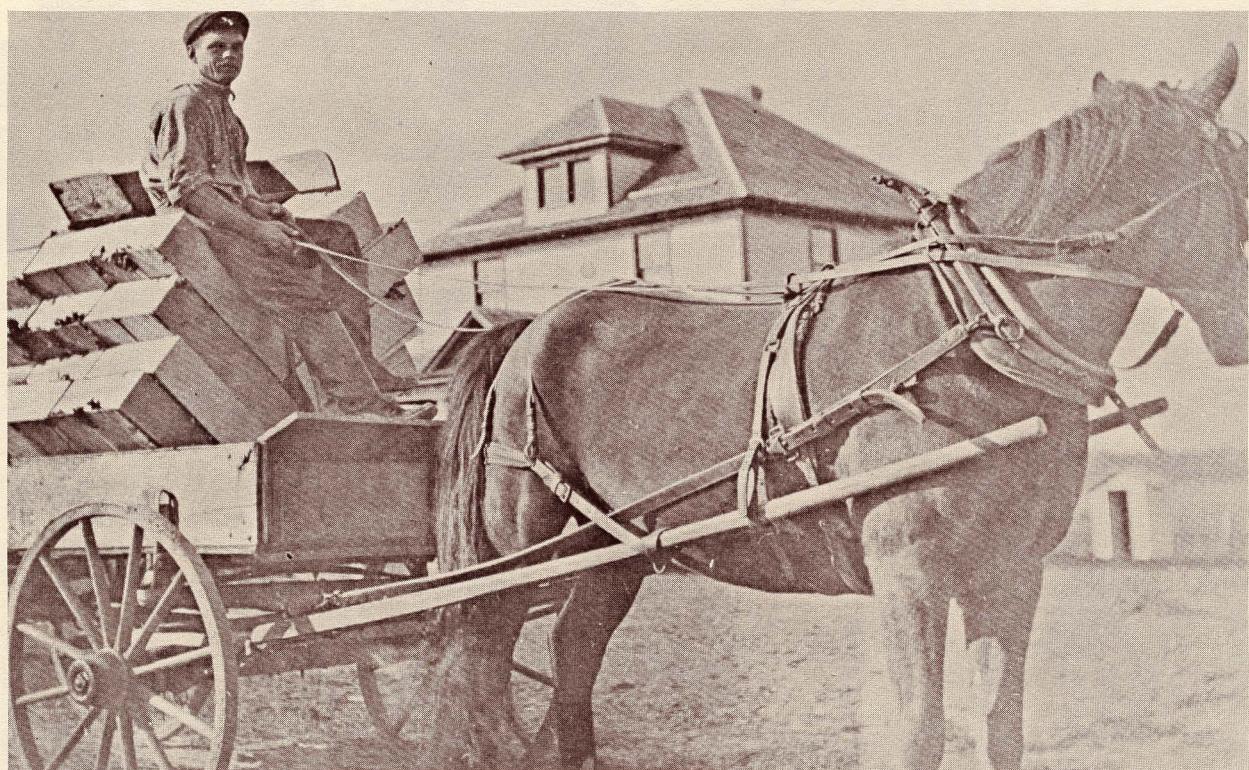
*Farmers banking celery in the field in fall for late harvest.*





*Mr. Nederhoed and celery. Logan's Feed Mill in background.*

*Gar de Vries on celery wagon in front of the Fletcher home.*



Some of the muck land that was sold was soon filled in with gravel and buildings erected on the spot where celery once grew. This happened to the Dontje and Byholt celery farms which contained the land where Portage Plaza now stands. John Byholt had for years been secretary-treasurer of the Portage Celery Growers Association. This group was formed when the growers shipped by train in refrigerated cars. One advantage of this type of cooperative was the ability to buy manure by the carload at a better price from the Chicago stockyard. All four of the Byholt's children still live in Portage as well as a number of their grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Just as the pioneers had done almost a century before, the celery growers who remained increased their holdings. The Schurings acquired a number of farms in various sections; the Romences added acreage as did the DeBruyns. The Romences, Schramms, Schurings, Hoeksemas and Elzingas seemed to be the forerunners in building the huge greenhouses we see dotting Portage today. No longer do they get up to stoke the stoves in the wee, small hours of the morning. Today these superb buildings are heated by gas, but in only one greenhouse can celery plants be seen growing inside on smooth, warm muck.

Today the Posthumus brothers still grow several acres of celery on Garden Lane. About the only hand labor required is setting out the small plants in the greenhouse sometime in February. In about mid-May the seedlings are planted out of doors but no longer by hand. Now a small planter seating two people moves rhythmically down two rows at a time. With a pressure of the foot the plant drops down and is pressed into the black soil. Weeds are dealt with by mechanical spraying, and in August when the harvest is due a large machine travels along the rows. The bunches are dug up, tossed into a large container in the front

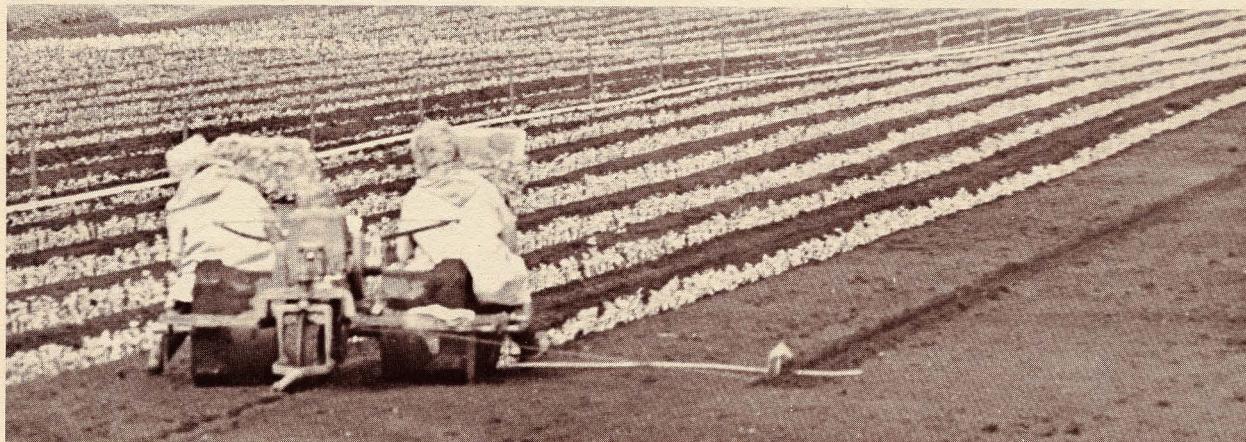
and taken to a barn rather than a shed. Here they are dropped into water which flows continuously, and the water is agitated sufficiently to wash the celery. After being thoroughly rinsed, the bunches are tossed into a very large revolving tray. As the wire tray whirls around, men on the opposite side lift off the bunches and pack them into crates to be shipped to their destination. The outside of each bunch looks beautifully clean but as one pulls off a stalk at home the bit of black soil adhering to the stalk may be a bit of Portage muck.

This last celery growing is not the only farming operation occurring on the muck lands of Portage. The other large greenhouses, including those of the Posthumus brothers, contain thousands of plants. These include tomato, cabbage, cauliflower, collard and other vegetable plants. Be-



Waterwheel on the Dontje celery farm.

*Celery planting the modern way - spring 1975.*



sides all the vegetable plants there are thousands of annuals which give color to flower gardens in dozens of states. It would be difficult to estimate how many thousand plants are grown in Portage. The Schramms, Romences, Hoeksemas and Elzingas do a large retail business, but many growers, like the Schurings, sell wholesale and truck their plants to hundreds of cities, many going to Chicago and Detroit. There are six Elzinga brothers still growing plants in Portage. Of course, the Romence Nursery operates all year, and it offers many house plants to give color to homes during the winter. Coming from Grand Rapids as celery growers in the early part of this century, the Romences turned to raising plants at a comparatively early date. They now operate one of the largest nurseries in this area.

A few growers begin their work in November and by February start sending their plants to the far south. The rest of the flowers are usually started about December with the bulk of the shipping coming from late April through early June. All the plants are fitted into small plastic boxes, usually four to six to a box. The boxes are then placed in a plastic tray called a flat, usually sixteen boxes to a flat, and the flats are fitted into shelves on huge trucks. Each small box has drainage holes in the bottom but the trays are solid. In this way the plants can be watered and the soil kept moist. The growers who sell pansies begin in late summer to start their plants and set them out in the fields. Pansies are rather hardy plants and in autumn they often bloom and turn a field into a riot of color. However, they must be covered during the winter or the plants will freeze. In early spring they are dug and placed in containers ready to go to market. They are one of the earliest flowers to appear on the scene in the spring. Their faces of many colors are a welcome sight after a long winter.

P  
O  
R  
T  
A  
G  
E

B  
R  
A  
N  
D

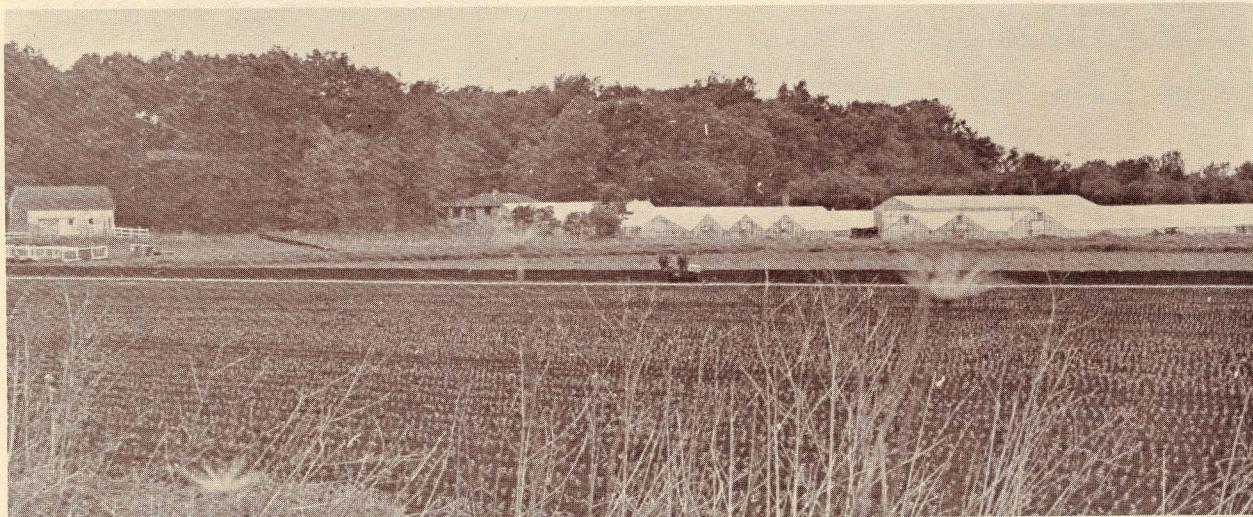


Inspected by  
Portage Celery Growers' Association



Seven little Dutchmen - photo from the Hoeksema album.

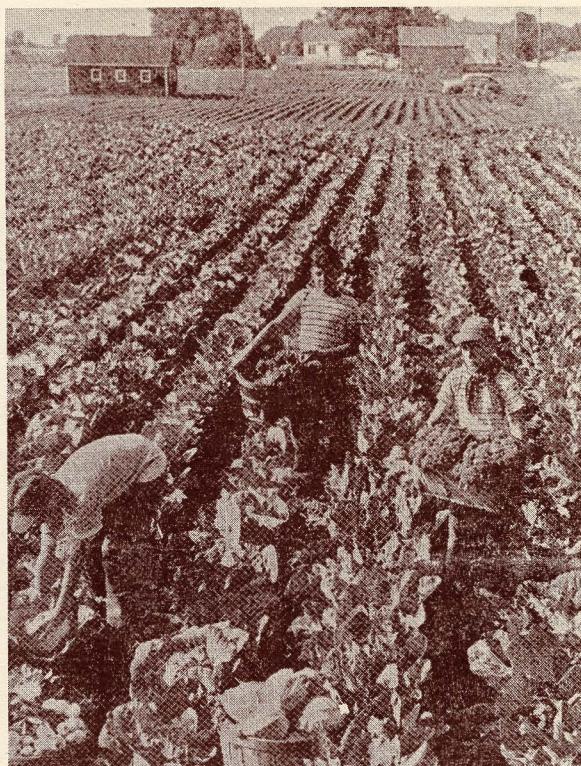
A few of Portage's many greenhouses.



As with the early settlers of Portage there has been a good deal of inter-marriage among the celery growers. There are very few of the descendants who do not claim uncles and aunts, cousins or second cousins still living in Portage. Many have gone into other businesses or professions. The Schuring family, one of the early growers with a large plant and flower business, today have greatly increased their holdings. The family is connected with a number of different enterprises.

In a growing city such as Portage, how long will the greenhouses remain? It is already unusual to see Black Angus grazing in the green fields of spring or tall corn waving in the wind in summer. Even today new roads are being built through recently productive farmland. There are several new areas being platted, soon to be sold as lots. The black muck is still being filled with tons of gravel. Portage Plaza, which was once a celery field, is now covered with buildings. The supermarket located there can no longer rely on local growers to supply it with enough fresh Portage celery to meet the demand.

*Mint pickers from the A.M. Todd Co. at work on the Dontje farm.*



*Celery gives way to other vegetable crops in Portage fields - ca. 1940.*





# 6

---

---

## Portage Schools

---

---

Michigan became a state in 1837, one of the several states carved out of the Northwest Territory. The previous year Lewis Cass, the Territorial Governor, had appointed John D. Pierce to devise a series of rules and regulations to govern all the publicly supported schools in Michigan. Both men were committed to free education for all children. After traveling to New England to inspect schools and interview the leading educators of the day, Mr. Pierce wrote a lengthy report detailing the regulations which he and Mr. Cass felt would provide the best education for every child in Michigan. The first elected legislature accepted this report, and Governor Stevens T. Mason appointed Mr. Pierce as the first superintendent of public instruction.

One of Mr. Pierce's first official acts was to begin auctioning off Section 16 in the various townships of the counties in Michigan. The Ordinance of 1787 stipulated that the money obtained from the 640 acres in every Section 16 would go to the state to be known as the Primary School Fund. All interest from the fund was to be distributed among the public schools on a per pupil basis. Mr. Pierce first disposed of the sections in his own county of Calhoun. He then moved on to Kalamazoo County. When he reached Section 16 in Portage, he encountered one of the most undesirable sections in the township. Sandy, hilly, marshy, mosquito-infested, full of brambles and snakes, it was a far cry from what the pioneers wanted for farm land.

A small area on the south side of the section with several acres of high ground was purchased by Asa Ingersoll to add to his farm on Oakland Drive. Two lots of this property are still owned by one of his descendants, Don Ingersoll, but the old farmhouse is gone. Only the well site remains.

The rest of the section was sold to various speculators until the celery farmers came to drain the marsh. Some of the largest landholders in Portage owned large pieces of land in Section 16, including Isaac Brooks, Ebenezer Durkee and Daniel Lathrop. When the stagecoach came through the township after the construction of the plank road, Lathrop built a hotel on part of his land and the tollhouse was located nearby.

Bounded by Centre Avenue, Westnedge Avenue, Romence Road and a line just west of Rockford Street, Section 16 is perhaps one of the most interesting sections in today's Portage. Saint Catherine of Siena Catholic Church is located on Centre Avenue with homes nearby which are surrounded by the trees once part of the wood lots belonging to the Cooleys, Abbotts and Ingersolls. Running through the middle of the section is Schuring Road with a number of homes and large greenhouses where thousands of plants are grown every year. Where once the celery plants grew, Portage Plaza now houses a number of business firms. On Shaver Road are the city hall, the police station and Portage City Park. From the top of Sandy Ridge Road, Woodland School may be seen with its sandy playground. Vacant land is still found along Westnedge Avenue and Romence Road, but soon the remaining marsh lands will be covered with sand and gravel. There still stands one lonely celery shed on Westnedge Avenue near Romence Road, but nearby construction now threatens to destroy this monument to an era which belongs to history.

Long before all these changes took place in Section 16, the first pioneers of Portage had established two schools. It is difficult to determine which school came first. In the meager information available, claims are made that both

Elijah Root and Caleb Sweetland started classes in their homes in 1832 or 1833, both dates being quoted in old histories. It is stated that Caleb Sweetland hired the first teacher, Rufus Rice from Vermont, and that he taught the settlers' children in Mr. Sweetland's log house. His students would have included the families of the neighboring Howards, Wattles, Kinnes and Brooks. Perhaps Mr. Root's own daughter taught school in their home as she later became a teacher in one of the district schools. Her students would have included the families of the nearby Harrisons, Woodards, Stones and Meyers. The following year Mr. Root built a crude schoolhouse on the south side of Milham Avenue, east of Portage Road, and this became District No. 1 school. In 1856 the building was replaced by a brick schoolhouse known as Indian Fields School. Allan Milham, great grandson of pioneer William Milham, relates that he attended this school as well as his father, brother, sisters, aunts and uncles. Although Milham no longer lives in Portage, he owns two houses in the city and a sizeable farm still being worked. His son lives in Portage and his two grandsons attend Northern High School. The grandsons are also descendants of pioneer Joseph Beckley, who was their great, great, great grandfather.

Soon after District No. 1 school was built,

Caleb Sweetland erected District No. 3 schoolhouse on the northwest corner of Milham Avenue and Angling Road. It was later known as the Brooks School, no doubt named for Isaac Brooks, who owned practically a whole section of land on the south side of Milham Avenue. Members of the families of later settlers who recall attending this school include the Bishops, Daileys, Henwoods, Gibbs, Hartmans and Derhammers. These settlers often called it Dailey School.

A short time after the Brooks school was built, District No. 2 was organized. The schoolhouse was located on the corner of Milham Avenue and Westnedge Avenue, called Carpenter's Corners at that time and now the location of Southland Mall. For many years it was known as Carpenters Corners School. Some of our present day citizens recall attending this school including Herschel Kilgore, Paul Romence and Carl Snow. Later the school was sold, converted into a house and occupied at one time by the Paul Romence family. Several years ago the house was moved to Oakland Drive and Kalorama Avenue where it was again remodeled and may be seen today.

Herschel Kilgore has an interesting booklet printed in 1921 which lists the fifty-three District No. 2 students as well as the teachers for that year. The eighth grade graduating class number-



*Picture-Taking Time...*

It is believed this picture was taken about 1888 in front of Portage school No. 5. In the back row (second from left) is Clayton Ingersoll who was born in 1880 and died in Portage in 1954. Mrs. Clayton Ingersoll lives at 729 Schuring. The fifth person (l to r) in back row—wearing glasses—

is Mrs. Edna Frick, 85, who now lives in a nursing home in Schoolcraft. She had been Mrs. Edna Tripp. Her maiden name was Wood. Second boy from left on ground is Floyd Akerson.



TAKEN IN 1899...

This may bring back many memories for pioneer Portage citizens. This photo was loaned to The Portage Herald by Mrs. Tony Zwart (Helen Timmer) of Portage. The shot was taken in 1899 in front of the Portage school. In some cases identifications are made with maiden and married names and in other cases—just maiden names. Bottom row, left to right, Anna Thole, Helen De Vries Gernaat, Helen Timmer Zwart, Beulah

Hawley and Hazel Wood Dontje. Second row, Cornelius and Charles Dontje (twins), Glenn Bauierla, Peter De Haan, John De Haan, John Linneman and Edith Hawley. Third row, Garrett De Vries, Richard Dykstra, Elizabeth Timmer Bouma, Elizabeth De Vries, Lela Wood Dustin and Lucy Donje Ide. Last row, Mrs. Carlton, Arthur Sherman, teacher, Miss Ella Carlton and Herb De Vries.

ed four, including Carl Snow and his close friend, Steven Gibbs. While attending high school and Kalamazoo College together, they drove the farm truck each day to a dairy in Kalamazoo to leave the cans of milk and picked up the empty cans before returning home from school.

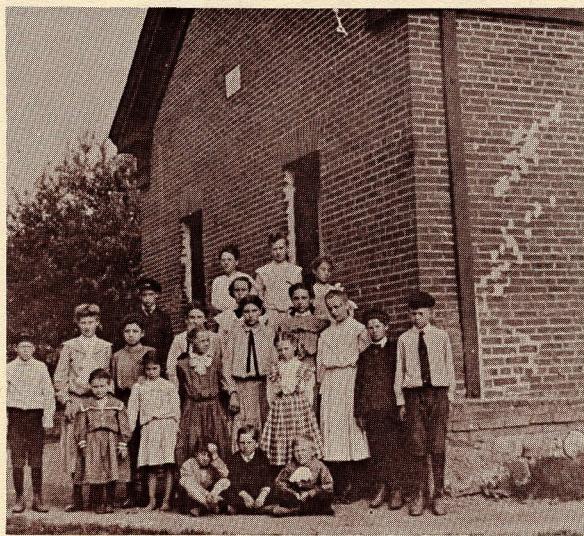
Kilgore, his two brothers and his cousins all attended the District No. 2 school. He is a direct descendant of pioneer settlers and he lives on part of the farm acquired by his ancestors between 1830 and 1840. Originally John Kilgore, Herschel's great grandfather, purchased a large tract of land on the north side of Kilgore Road. A little later he bought more land on the south side, some extending south to Milham Avenue and including, to the west, the present site of Loy Norrix High School. Herschel's grandfather inherited the part of the original farm where Herschel is living today on Lovers Lane. The house was built by his grandfather but Herschel retains only twenty acres of land from the old farm. Both his sons live in Portage, one on part of the old farm. His grandchildren attend Portage Schools. The Osterhouts, descendants of Vaydor Pierce, also have grandchildren in the Portage Schools as do the Matteson descendants.

District No. 7 had been established shortly

after Carpenter's Corners school was started. There is no record of the dates when Districts No. 4, No. 5 and No. 6 were established but District No. 8 was the last one organized. The children in this district had been attending Fractional District No. 1 school in Texas Township and the parents wanted a school nearer to their homes. In 1856 Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Booth gave one half acre of their farm as the site for a new schoolhouse. The Rockwell and Bonfoey families were instrumental in getting the school established. When the building was no longer used for school purposes, it served as a residence for several families before being purchased by its present owner, Gordon Bozell. The schoolhouse, now vacant, still stands in its original location on Oakland Drive just south of Shaver Road.

There are very few citizens in Portage today who recall the early district schools, but even the schools they attended must have been modern compared with the first ones built by Mr. Root and Mr. Sweetland. There were no blackboards in those early schools; a crude wood-burning stove supplied the heat; and the rough floor was swept by the teacher everyday with a rush broom. The children supplied their own slate and slate pencil and bought their own readers. The older students

were required to furnish their own copy books usually put together from foolscap paper. Every morning the teacher carefully wrote a sentence or



*Indian Fields School (District No. 1) built in 1856.*

two at the top of the page with a quill point pen. During the day the students were required to make a precise copy. The pens were sharpened by the teacher. Good penmanship and skill in sharpening quills were prime requisites for a teacher, and often adults in the community asked the teacher to sharpen quills for them. Goose quills came from the Netherlands and cost five cents a dozen.

At first a rate system was used to supplement the always insufficient primary fund money so that the teacher could be paid and a few supplies purchased. Each family would pay a prorated amount per pupil and contribute a fair share of wood to heat the school. The wood was to be cut and neatly stacked by mid-November. In later years bids were let to see which farmer would charge the least for his wood and he would supply all the wood for the winter.

In order to obtain primary fund money, school had to be kept for at least three months a year. Schools were usually held in the winter when the children were not required to work on the farm. The winter term began after Thanksgiving and continued from thirteen to fifteen weeks. School

*The Brooks School - District No. 3.*



was in session five and one half days a week. The teacher in charge had to be qualified or no primary fund money would be forthcoming. A qualified teacher was anyone who completed the eighth grade in a district or graded school and who later passed the examination issued by the state superintendent of instruction. This examination was conducted by the elected school inspector, known as the director. In addition, a teacher had to be a person of high principles, excellent morals and completely honest. If a candidate passed all the requirements, he or she was given a certificate for one term, lasting from three to four months. In 1865 the average salary in Portage for three months of school was about \$40.00 for a male teacher and about \$17.00 for a female teacher.

As part of the school laws of 1785 and 1837 provision was made for a library in each district. The state provided a certain amount of money for books to be distributed to the various districts in accordance with the number of children in school. All people residing in the district could borrow books providing they followed the rules set up by the state. Although the money issued was a small amount, it did establish a precedent for school libraries and it helped to provide reading material for early settlers. The amount for some districts would barely pay for one book today, but in earlier days books cost from only five to twenty-five cents each.

By 1859 it was found that many of the laws adopted by the first legislature did not work. A complete set of new laws was written by John Gregory, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and adopted by the legislature. This was a lengthy, involved set of directions for all types of government supported schools. It gave full instructions on how to set up a primary school, how to meet expenses and how to teach. Because of the numerous reports on school operations which the new laws required districts to make to both the county and state, Mr. Gregory compiled a lengthy school district record book where all kinds of records and statistics could be entered for reporting at the end of the year. According to a recent book by a former state superintendent, these reports are still on file in Lansing.

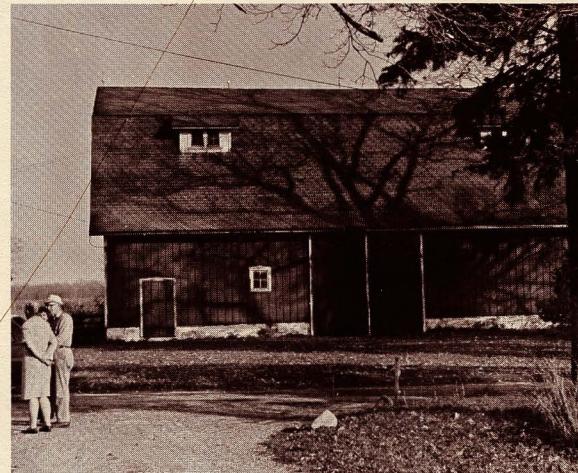
There are only three of the old district school records available in Portage, but they give some very interesting facts. One begins in 1865 and continues into the twentieth century. In addition to the district record book there was a daily attendance book and a detailed course of study. Each subject was handled in detail and no child was supposed to be promoted until each subject was mastered. On the inside of the cover it stated that every teacher should be supplied with the book "How to Teach a Country School," which cost \$1.00. A copy of this book could not be located.

As a rule only one school board meeting was held during the year unless some emergency arose. At these meetings the board decided the length of the school year, whether to hire a male or female teacher, salary to be paid, how much to collect from the rate bill to supplement the primary fund and how much wood to buy from the lowest bidder. The budget was decided on including a small amount for incidentals, usually between \$8.00 and \$10.00. During one year, minutes showed that these incidentals included a yearly cleaning woman for the school at \$3.00, a box of chalk for \$.25, a new broom for \$.40 to \$.50, a new tin dipper for \$.20 and a water pail for \$.40. Besides these incidental expenses money had to be voted for school repairs, usually made necessary by the work of vandals. Broken windows, broken steps, and damaged siding were included almost every year. The repairs were



*William and Francis Kilkore. William was the son of pioneer John Kilkore and the grandfather of Portage resident, Herschel Kilkore.*

*The Allan Milham farm at Sprinkle and Bishop.*



often done by the board members but materials had to be purchased. Twice the boys were caught and the parents were requested to pay \$1.00 each. Vandalism seemed to be a problem in the nineteenth century as well as today.

Salaries varied little from 1865 to well into the 1870's. One particular school usually employed a female teacher. In 1865 she was paid \$40.00 for the winter term and \$2.50 a week for a fourteen week spring term. In 1871 two large families moved into the district and forty children at-

tended school, five of them boys of seventeen who came during the winter term. An additional teacher seemed in order. The board decided to hire a male teacher whose salary started at \$86.00 a term in 1872 and climbed to \$125.00 by 1878. The female teacher received \$42.00 for the spring term and advanced to \$52.00 by 1878. That year the two new families left and a female teacher was



*Carpenters Corners School (District No. 2) - ca. 1917.  
Below: several years later.*



*Carpenters Corners School was converted into this house and later moved to its present location on Oakland Drive.*





*The old brown frame schoolhouse (District No. 5) at Centre and Westnedge - ca. 1879. Standing from left are Priscilla Donahue, Minnie Bacon Geddes, Grace Thompson Garlick, Libbie Reid, Bessie Hawkins Bennett, Mary White Patterson, Miss Emma Averill (teacher), Mabel Bacon Munger, Clara Durkee Austin and 4 younger children including Vida Thompson Smith and Bess Thompson Southwell. Seated boys include Eddie Pike, Francis Donahue and Sherman Fox.*

*This picture has been identified as District No. 5 school.*



hired for both terms at \$56.00 a term. In 1884 the teacher was paid \$60.00, and the board decided to pay \$24.00 a term for her board so that she could stay with one family instead of moving from family to family as a guest which had been customary. In 1890 her salary increased to \$154.00 but she had to pay her own board. By 1900 she received \$290.00 a term and the board bought a new school bell. Another twenty-five years would pass before boards of education began to think of equalizing salaries for men and women.

In 1867 the legislature passed another new school law. No longer could the director give the examinations and inspect the school for good teaching. From then on each county hired a superintendent who was responsible for examining the teachers at the county seat. Besides giving and correcting the exams, he visited every district school in the county and was responsible for all yearly reports from the schools. At his county office these reports were placed on file and a condensed copy sent to Lansing. Portage had eight district schools at this time.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close the winds of change were evident all along the marshlands. Soon after the Timmer and the Oudema families arrived in 1885, at least eight other Dutch families bought from three to five acres of land along Westnedge Avenue and Centre Avenue. Others, including the Schuring family, acquired land on the lane which is now Schuring Road. Celery raising had come to Portage. New homes began going up; and because many of the celery farmers had sizeable families, the little red brick school known as District No. 5 was soon

*District No. 7 School on Bacon Road, now the home of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Daniels. Mrs. Daniels was the teacher at the school.*



70

bursting at the seams. The school board had to act, but money was scarce. First board members rented the Grange Hall and then the Celery Growers Association building to use as classrooms. When these two buildings began to be overcrowded, they again knew something must be done. As luck would have it, a nearby school of higher learning was having problems in finding room for its student teachers. In 1920 Dwight Waldo, president of the Western State Normal College, now Western Michigan University, came to a board meeting of the Portage Center District No. 5 school. He proposed a cooperative arrangement whereby District No. 5 school would become one of the teacher training centers of the normal school and Western, in turn, would hire and pay for the teachers and the equipment for a new school. The board would pay for the new school building from tax money received in the district. All state aid and primary fund money would go to the normal school to help pay the teachers' and principal's salaries and buy furniture. After obtaining approval from the State Department of Public Instruction, the three board members then had to gain approval by the citizens of their first bond issue. Little did they know at that time what an avalanche of such issues would follow. The citizens were responsive and the board began looking for a suitable site. Immediately following the purchase of five acres of land on Westnedge Avenue south of Centre Avenue, an advertisement for bids for a new school was placed in the Kalamazoo Gazette. In the fall of 1922 the Portage Agricultural School opened with five teachers and 183 students.

Cleora Skinner served both as superintendent and teacher and Lewis Crawford combined the duties of principal and teacher. Miss Skinner and Mr. Crawford received \$130.00 a month and Anne Lubke, Vera Pickard and Marian Hall, the other three teachers, received \$90.00 a month each.

*The last District No. 5 School.*



Because Mr. Crawford was a man, he received the same salary as the superintendent reflecting the continued difference in salary rate between men and women.

During that first year two districts were annexed, changing the new school's name to the Portage Consolidated Agricultural School, and soon an addition was made to the building. The following September, 1923, there were 278 students and kindergarten was added. For the first two weeks, the kindergarten children and teachers sat on the floor because the chairs had not arrived. A home economics department was organized and it, in turn, launched a hot lunch program. Once again the enrollment increased and the Celery Growers Association building was rented as before for \$50.00 a semester. By 1925 enrollment of students increased to well over 300, and again the board had to decide whether to enlarge the building. At about this time, District No. 7 petitioned the board for annexation to Portage Consolidated Agricultural School. The school on Bacon Road had for some years been troubled with its water supply and because one board member felt it was not fit to drink the board decided to seek annexation so that students could

attend the Portage Agricultural School. Another desirable result of annexation would be the opportunity to attend high school in the district without paying tuition. In previous years stu-



*District No. 8 School on Oakland Drive as it looks today.*

*District No. 8 School - spring of 1926.*





First P.T.A. organized November 20, 1925. Top row from left: Anna Lubke and Marion Hall; center row from left: Mrs. G. H. Huizenga and Fred Folkertsma; bottom row from left: Mrs. H. B. Sweetland and Mrs. L. F. Bremer.

dents had attended high school in Kalamazoo. Merrill Bacon recalls how he rode his bicycle to the Portage depot, boarded an early train and then walked to Central High School from the station in Kalamazoo. In the afternoon he had to be excused fifteen minutes early to catch the train going home.

The Portage board approved the annexation, but Western State Normal College and the State Board of Education would not give their consent. After considerable discussion each board decided to float a bond issue. Both issues were passed by the voters enabling Portage Agricultural School to purchase three acres of adjoining land and District No. 7 to purchase a new site on Portage Road. In 1928 another addition was completed for the Agricultural School, and District No. 7 decided to call its new two-room school Lake Center Primary School.

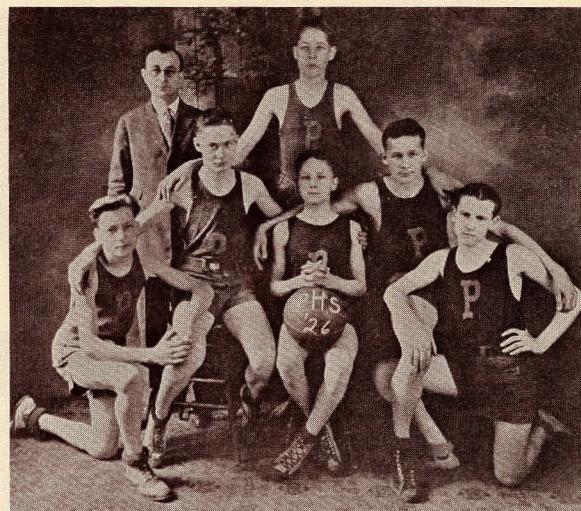
The next few years were relatively uneventful with both schools attempting to improve the quality of education offered. Neither one realized what the future would bring nor how they would grow. Lake Center had the most difficulty in meeting its budget from year to year. The extra two mills voted each year were never quite enough to meet added expenses including coal instead of wood for the larger building, extra pay to one of

## THIS IS WESTERN NORMAL'S NEW FIVE ROOM PRACTICE SCHOOL



the teachers for performing janitorial duties, and increased teacher salaries which in 1930 were \$90.00 a month for a nine month school year. In addition school money was tied up in the old school until 1931 when it was purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Daniels. The Daniels still live in the little school on Bacon Road where Mrs. Daniels once served as teacher.

Although Western State Normal College continued to pay the salaries of the teachers, Portage Agricultural School had many more expenses running a high school. Programs were continually being expanded; three bus drivers and a janitor were now employed; it was necessary to buy coal from the Mein Coal Company for the furnace which replaced the wood burning stoves; and gas, oil and repair bills for the buses came regularly from Gemrich's Garage. More children appeared every September when school opened which contributed dramatically to increased expenses. In ten years the enrollment increased by almost 200 and in 1932, when the enrollment reached 381,



*Coach P. J. Dunn's 1926 basketball squad. That year organized baseball was also played by both boys and girls.*

*Portage Agricultural School's first Board of Education (from left to right): C. H. Fletcher, president; A. L. Snow, secretary; Harm Schuring, treasurer; H. B. Sweetland and George Chipman, trustees.*



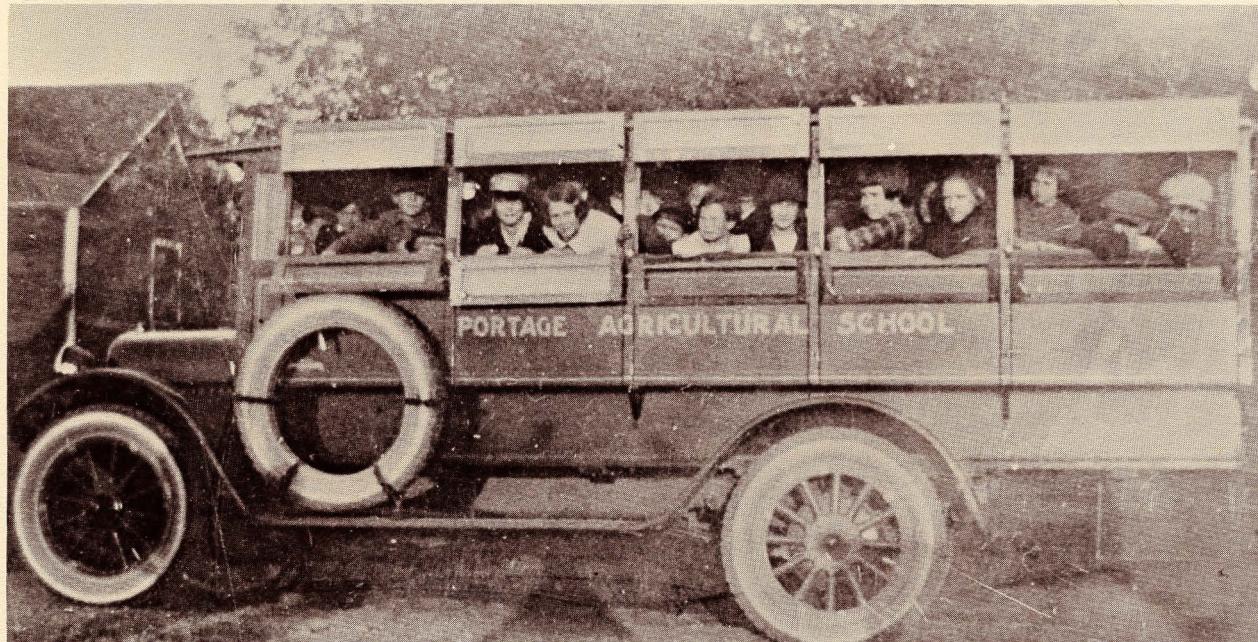
*Portage Agricultural School in the mid-twenties.*





## *First Home Ec Class...*

*Home Ec for boys is not a new concept. Members of this 1933 class were (back from left) Lowell Matteson, Claus Schuring, Olin Kinney, Dick Dykstra and (front from left) Henry DeVries, Floyd Pond, Ed Lamson, Mrs. Herbs (teacher), Harold Derhammer, Henry Dedie and Bert Wilson.*



there were eighteen teachers and six members on the board of education.

It was fortunate that throughout this period of growing pains the parents were very supportive of the school system. It seemed at times like one happy family. Every year the parents, teachers and children had a huge picnic at Summer Home Park on Long Lake. Miss Skinner relates rather an interesting story about these picnics. The teachers and superintendent had decided to alter-

nate the picnics between Summer Home and Ramona Park. When the manager at Ramona Park refused to close the bar, Summer Home was chosen for the yearly outing. Miss Skinner stated she absolutely refused to face any possibility of "her children" returning home drunk. Miss Marian Hall recalls that the teachers rented all the rowboats available so the older children could go for a boat ride. She wondered what would happen if the teachers did this today. It is doubtful that



*Mother's Club - February, 1932.*

*Bus transportation has changed since early driver Porter Matteson posed with his charges.*



# Portage

## Basketball Gazette

VOL. 1.

PORTAGE, MICH. MARCH 23, 1933.

NO. 1

**PORTAGE TEAMS HONORED****43 Straight Wins**

Such has been the record of the basketball teams of the last two years. The game lost to Stevensville was the second out of 64 games played. What team will beat this record?

**Trophy Case Available Soon**

The Basketball Gazette takes great pleasure in announcing the gift of the Class of 1932.

Each class which graduates leaves some gift to its Alma Mater. The proceedings of the last meeting of the Class of 1932 show that they left their money to be used for a trophy case. After the purchase of the case, the balance of the money will go to the school radio fund.

The trophies have become quite numerous as each team has brought in its share. The question of "Where shall we put it?" will not long have to be asked because in the near future the vision of the Class of '32 will be realized.

**PORTAGE HEARS WELL KNOWN SPEAKERS**

Many well known speakers have contributed generously of their time and talents by participating actively in our banque programs. We appreciate their help.

1932—Dr. Ernest Burnham  
1932—Mr. Judson Hyman  
1932—Dr. William McCracken  
1930—Mr. John C. Hoeke  
1929—Dr. D. B. Waldo  
1928—Dr. Carl Schott

**P. T. A. Sponsors Banquet**

The sixth annual banquet honoring the local teams will be held in the school gymnasium, Thursday evening, March 23, at six-thirty o'clock.

The Parent-Teacher Association is sponsoring the banquet which is an anticipated event in the community. Mr. Leroy Carr, president of the association is general chairman.

The reception committee will consist of Miss Cleora Skinner, principal, Mr. C. Fletcher, Mr. A. Snow, Mr. H. Schuring, Mr. H. Sweetland and Mr. G. Chipman, members of the school board; Mr. L. Carr, Mrs. F. Kingsbury, Mr. A. Meyer, Miss Leila McDowell, Mrs. J. Kramer and Mr. H. Wolbers.

Ticket sales have given every indication that the largest number will be in attendance. The publicity committee are Mr. F. J. Dunn, Mr. Garland Lacey, Mr. H. Schuring, Miss Sigrid Englund and Miss Dorothea Lindau while ticket sales are in charge of Mr. L. D. Crawford, Mr. A. Snow, Mr. Porter Matteson, Mr. Henry Oudeman, Mr. Herman Visker, Mr. John Gemrich, Mr. Thomas Schuring and Mr. Bernard Fletcher.

The gymnasium will be dressed up for the occasion by the decorating committee. Mr. C. H. Fletcher, Mr. Frank Meyer, Mr. J. Kramer, Mr. Koert Kuiper, Miss Lena Reniger, Mr. A. Peterson, Miss Vern Fenslernacher, Mrs. R. Derkisen, Mrs. F. Kingsbury, Mr. Ralph Fletcher, Mrs. Beri Nederhoed and Mr. Harm Kuiper.

chosen his career in professional baseball. Originally signed by the Detroit Tigers, Leon Roberts, class of 1969, now plays with the Houston Astros and is followed enthusiastically on television by Portage citizens.

When Miss Skinner retired in 1939, Hugh Archer followed her as superintendent. That same year Lewis Crawford, principal for seventeen years, left to do graduate work at the University of Michigan. When Mr. Archer came, the teachers were still hired by Western State Normal College with one exception. The board of education hired a half-time band and orchestra teacher. The band had been started in 1925 and since there remained considerable enthusiasm among the students, the board felt it was best to hire an instructor. Times have not changed and music is an important part of the curriculum with many fine performances given by the bands, orchestras and choruses. Some graduates have made music a career. Although not a graduate of Portage, the internationally famous conductor, Thomas Schippers, attended Portage Agricultural School through the fifth grade.

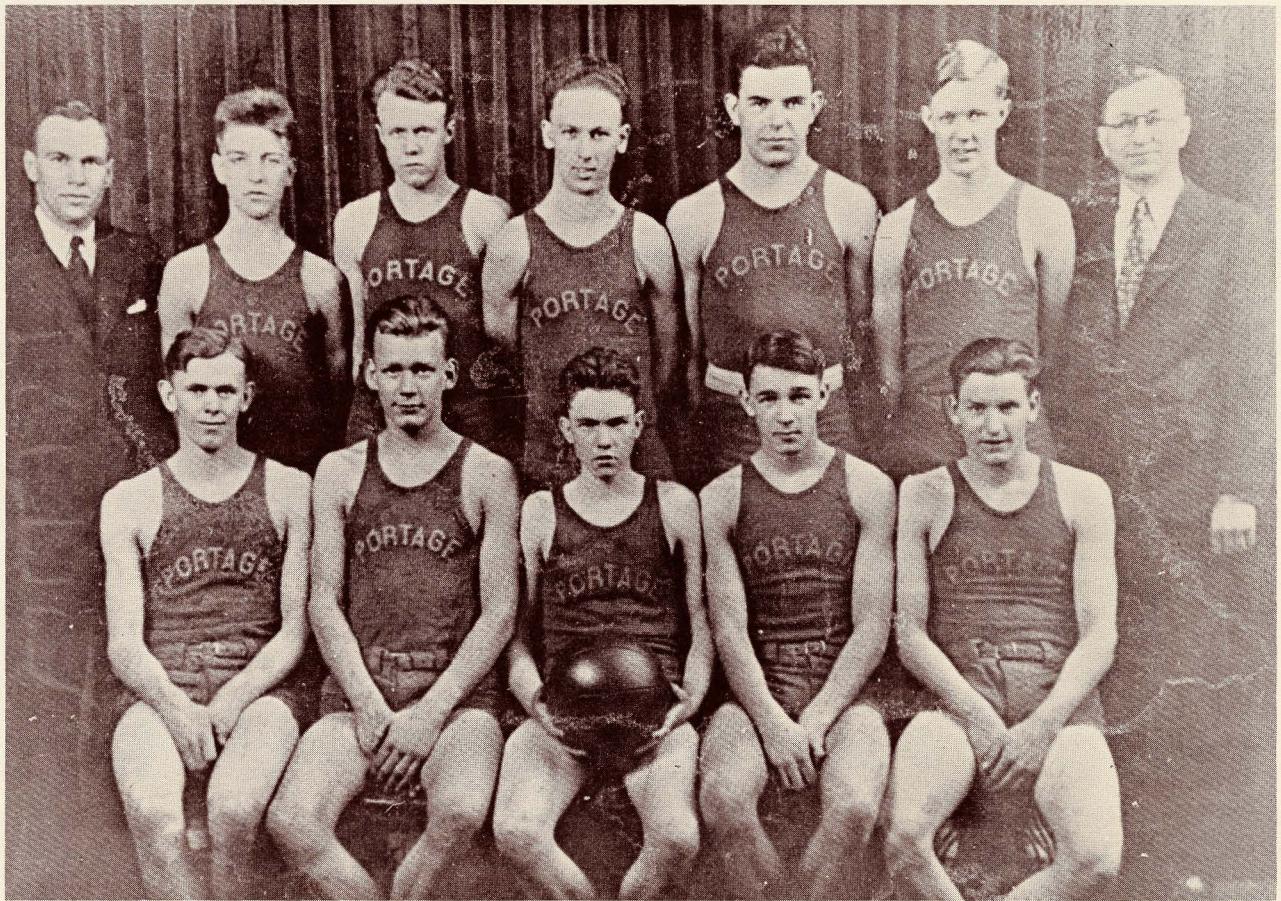
Soon the new superintendent faced the problem which had been historically the biggest one for Portage schools, i.e. overcrowding. The onset of World War II made building materials unobtainable. In 1943, while he and the board wrestled with these problems, Mr. Archer was called into service. Mr. Crawford, who had returned from the University of Michigan as principal, became acting superintendent. Because the school could not handle the increased enrollment, Portage decided to have school only through the tenth grade; the eleventh and twelfth grades were sent into Kalamazoo with a choice of Western's Campus School, Kalamazoo Central High School, or Kalamazoo Christian High School. When Mr. Archer returned from service and was hired as superintendent of the Paw Paw Training School, Mr. Crawford became superintendent of the Portage schools.

Throughout these years, there had been constant agitation among the remaining five district schools to be annexed to Portage Agricultural School. Although annexation had been turned down by Western at various times, Mr. Crawford realized something must be done. Enrollments were increasing all over the township and many of the parents in these schools wanted their children to attend Portage Agricultural School. One group of parents, in particular, raised strong objections when, because of overcrowding, their children were taught in classrooms converted from a vacant tavern at the corner of Portage Road and Centre Avenue. After several conferences with Paul Sangren, President of Western, and members of the Michigan Board of Education, a plan was devised whereby Western would contribute a

the lake would hold so many people.

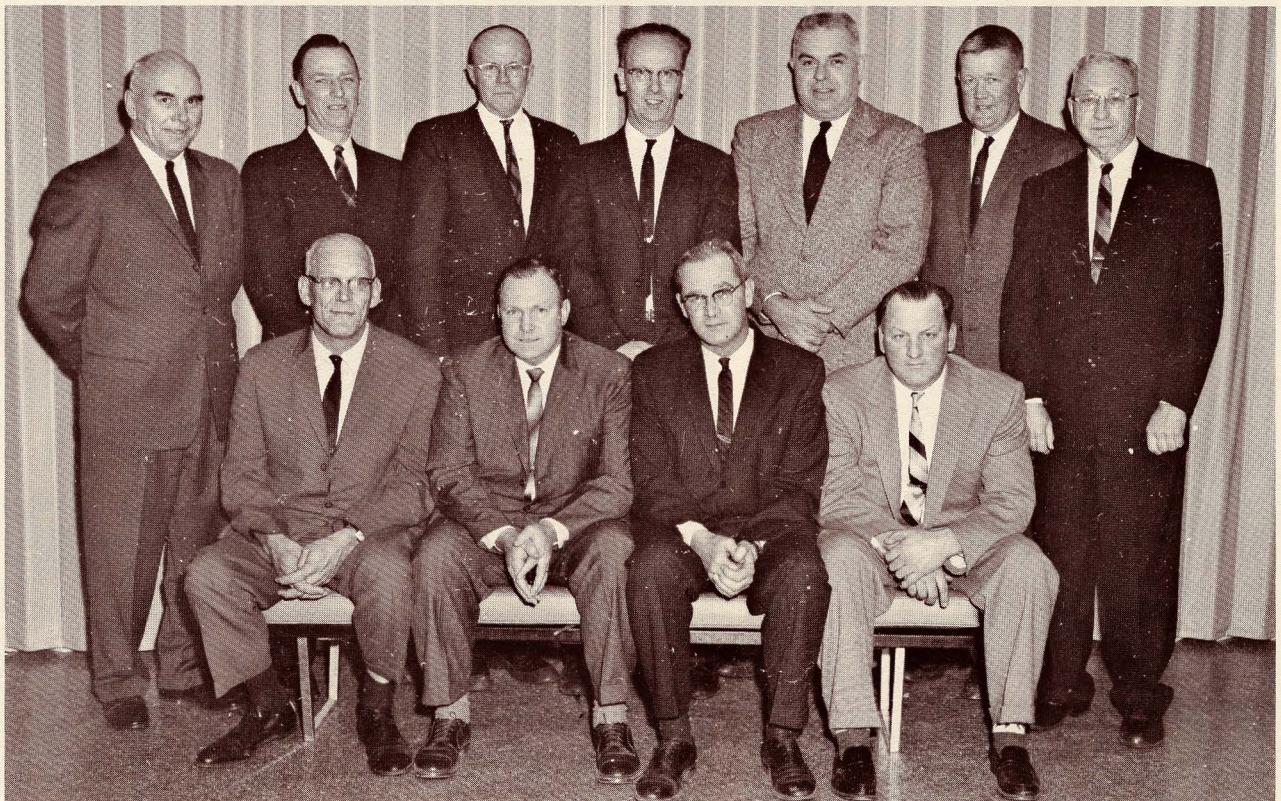
During the seventeen years that Miss Skinner was superintendent many changes took place. In addition to an ever increasing enrollment and additions to the building, several new courses were added to the high school program. Although few students, after completing the eighth grade, went on to higher grades, every effort was made to broaden the curriculum. In 1925, the year the P.T.A. was formed, Portage began competing in basketball with area high schools. Although the school did not have a regular physical education teacher, P. J. Dunn coached the boys in a number of sports. In 1931-32 Portage's baseball and track teams won the county titles. In 1932-33, the basketball team was outstanding, winning the county, district, regional and state championships.

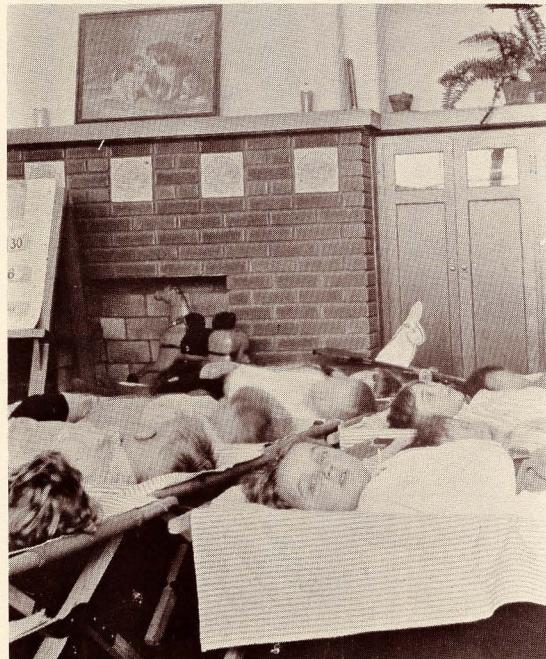
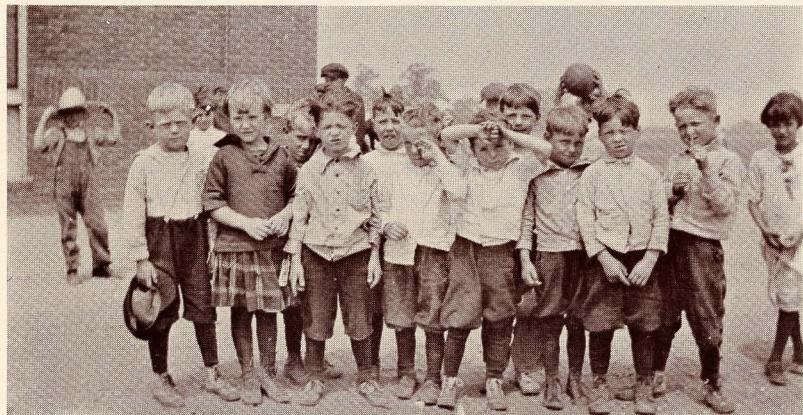
As the years passed, Portage remained interested in sports and the enthusiasm Mr. Dunn engendered so many years ago remains evident among the students. Games held during the year are well attended and the various teams claim many victories. Both high schools currently belong to the Southwestern Michigan Athletic Conference. Swimming and hockey are favorite new varsity programs, and girls' varsity teams have been established in several sports. One of Portage Northern High School's graduates has

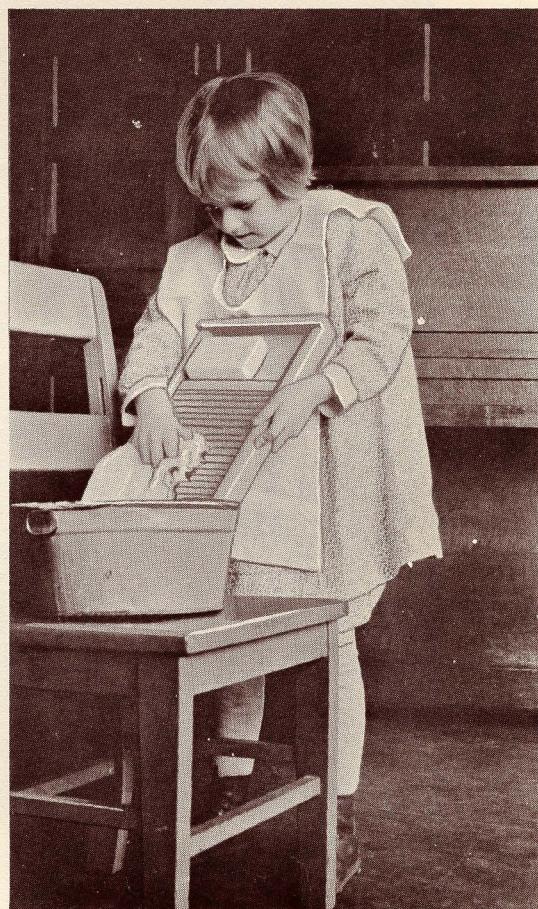
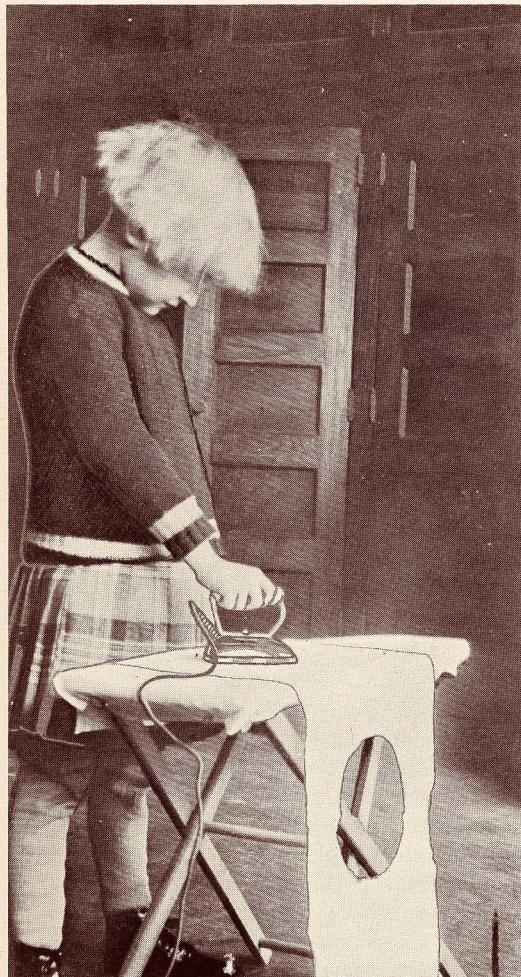


Class D State Champs - 1932. Back, from left: Coach Fran Pellegrrom, John Kuiper, Ray Bates, Olin Kinney, Bill Burr, Tony Schuring and Principal P. J. Dunn. Front, from left: Wayne Holcomb, Claude Fletcher, Lowell Matteson, Bernie Meyer, and John Kramer.

*Below: About thirty years later (Wayne Holcomb, absent).*









Kindergarten Maypole - 1935.

*Reminders of the Dutch heritage.*



progressively smaller amount for salaries each of the next three years. At the same time Portage would receive primary fund and state aid monies and would hire its own teachers as well as furnish the twelve-room addition to the school building which was opened in 1947. So Portage Agricultural School became Portage Township Schools and all eight districts were included. Mr. Crawford had worked hard for consolidation and when he left in June of 1947 he was well satisfied with his achievement.

When Varl Wilkinson came to Portage as superintendent the summer of 1947, he found three overcrowded schools, Lake Center Elementary, Pershing Elementary and Central Elementary and High School. The enrollment increased 234% in the next decade from 1273 to 3587 students. During that period two additions were made at Lake Center and Central added ten more rooms and a large gym. Three new elementary schools were built, Milham, Waylee and a new Pershing.

In the next ten years, 1957-1967, one bond issue failed out of eleven and a total of \$18,000,-000 was spent on new construction. The following is a chronological list of the new schools opened: Central Junior High, Ramona Lane Elementary, Amberly Elementary, North Junior High, Haverhill Elementary, Angling Road Elementary, Northern High School, and Lexington Green Elementary. During that time the school population increased by four to eight hundred students each year. Besides the increase in the township

schools, this growth reflected the annexation of portions of the city of Kalamazoo and Pavilion, Texas and Oshtemo townships.

In 1963 when Portage became a city, the Portage Township Schools became the Portage Public Schools. The district covered an area of nearly forty-five square miles, excluding the lake areas. By September, 1967, the enrollment reached 10,414 and 581 seniors graduated from the two high schools that year, quite a change from the six graduates of 1925. It is interesting to note that Albert Curry, great-grandson of Arad Cooley, who was a first settler in 1832 on Dry Prairie, happened to be one of the 1925 graduates and was president of his class. He became a county agricultural agent for some years but later returned to the home farm. His brother, Donald, graduated in the class of 1930 and pursued a career in agriculture which eventually led to his participation in the Point Four Technical Assistance Program, helping such countries as India, Liberia and Nigeria to achieve greater productivity through new methods of agriculture.

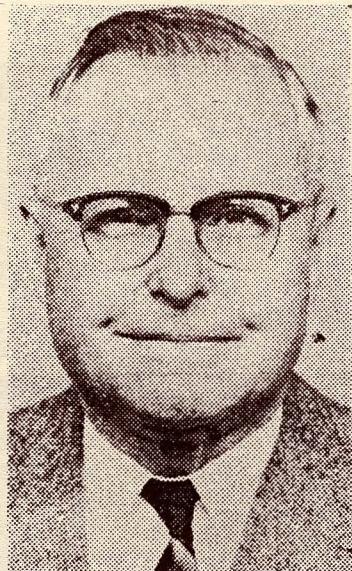
After 1967 only three schools were built, Woodland and new Central Elementaries and West Junior High School. By 1970 the population had become more stable and growth in school enrollment tapered off. The four superintendents during the period of rapid growth worked with dedicated and interested school boards. Much extra time was spent in choosing sites for new schools, going over bids, and deciding on new equipment. During that time the fleet of buses

*Pershing School (District No. 6), built in 1927 to replace an older structure. After the present Pershing was constructed, this building was used for almost two decades as a clothing distribution center.*





*Cleora Skinner*



*Hubert Archer*



*Lewis D. Crawford*

grew from ten in 1947 to over fifty at the present time. Today the transportation department has its own maintenance program, a bus drivers' training program and its own storage facilities.

Although an ever increasing building program continued through the years, the educational purpose of the schools was not forgotten. A competent administrative staff was hired to support the teaching staff as the need arose. Today administrative positions include directors in the

following areas of responsibility: elementary education, secondary education, audio-visual and library services, curriculum, special education, vocational education, and employee relations. In addition there are a business manager, an administrative assistant to the superintendent who is also responsible for the community school programs, and an assistant superintendent supervising transportation, food service and maintenance operation.



*School picnic at Summer Home Park on Long Lake - 1925.*



*Varl Wilkinson*



*George Conti*

*Portage Schools have had five superintendents.*

Changes in the curriculum were usually accomplished through staff working together with parents and students. The curriculum was constantly reviewed, updated, and improved; and innovative programs were evaluated in one or two schools before being adopted. There is, today, a wide variety of both academic and vocational offerings.

In addition to the music program which dates back to the nineteen twenties, the arts are well

represented both within and outside the curriculum as well as a wide variety of other extra curricular activities. Art and drama events are scheduled regularly and debate and forensics are part of the curriculum in both high schools. There is a well developed and active distributive education department. To supplement all these activities the Audio-Visual and Library Services department provides centralized services for the procurement and processing of all library materials.

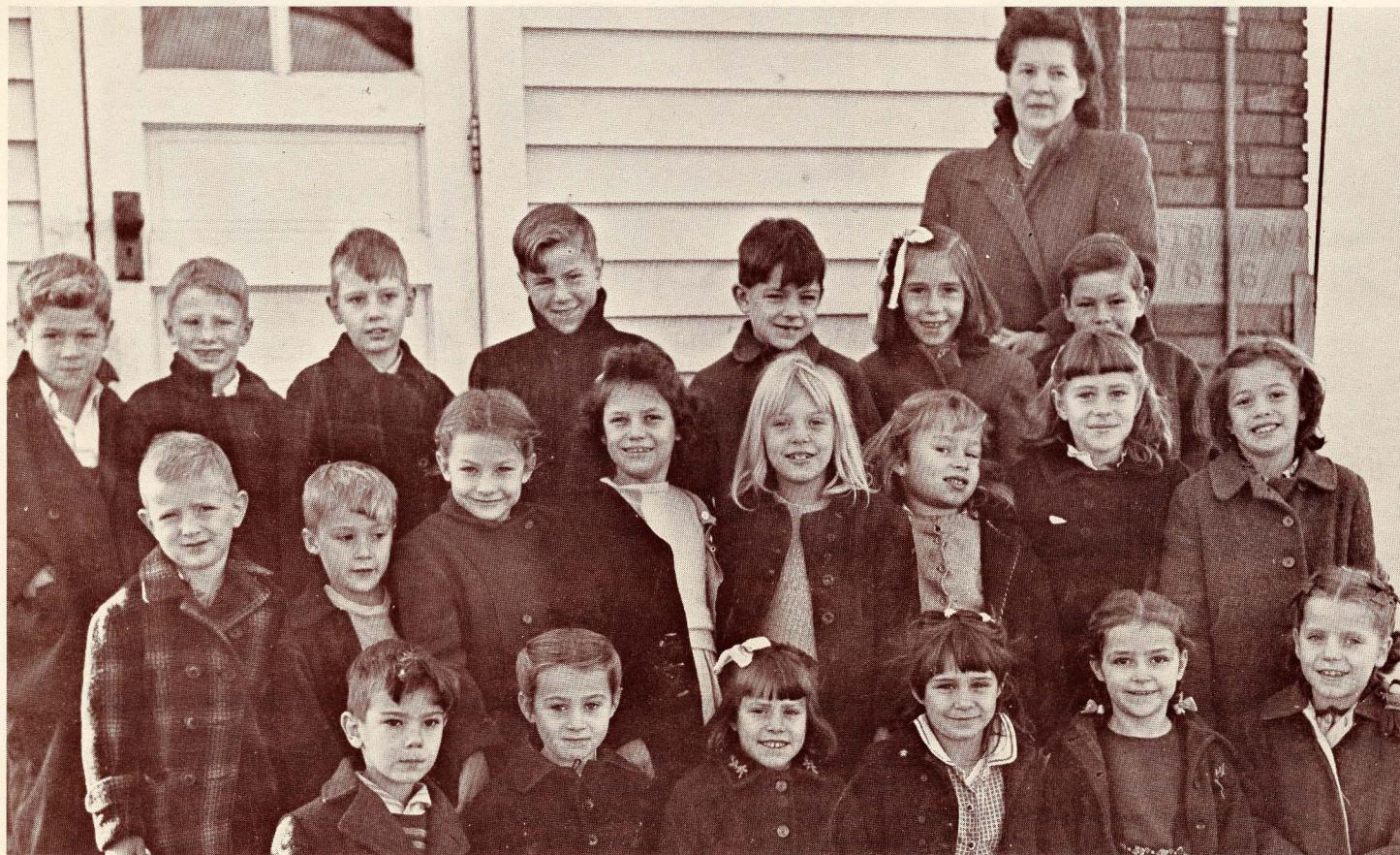




School picnic at Summer  
Home Park on Long Lake -  
1925.

82

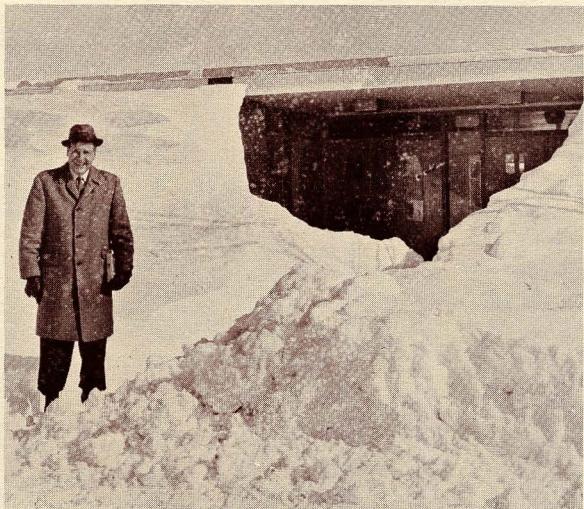






In 1964 the primary fund was absorbed by the state aid fund. State aid money which now supplies about 37% of school revenues comes from a variety of sources, including state income tax, the Michigan lottery, sales tax and liquor tax. Every year the legislature determines how much state aid per pupil will be made available to the schools and it is often slow in coming to a decision. In the meantime, the board of education and the superintendent must operate with a tentative budget. Even after the per pupil rate is known, the budget can not be finalized until the fourth Friday in September when the official school count is made. The exact amount of state aid can at last be computed and that sum added to the operating income from local property taxes which presently furnishes 59% of school revenues (about half from residential and half from business and industrial taxes).

The influence of the state is felt locally by the school board and administration in one area other than state aid, i.e. school legislation. Ever since the Ordinance of 1785, existing laws have been amended or repealed and replaced by new ones. Some of these laws have benefited the schools; some seem to be the whim of a particular interest group. All of them take a measure of control away from the local board of education. Historically, curriculum control has always been the prerogative of city public schools; however twice a curriculum was written for country schools by the state superintendent. The first was a rather brief resumé of how to schedule classes and what to teach in each grade. It had an accompanying book entitled *How to Teach a Country School*. The



*Where's Amberly? Superintendent Varl Wilkinson inspects the schools after the 1967 record-breaking snowfall.*

*Many of today's 10,000 students ride to school on one of the system's 70 busses.*



*1975 reunion of Portage High School 1924 and 1925 graduates. From left: Dorothea Huizinga, Bertha Dustin Hope (class of '24); Eleanor Matteson Burdick, Jennie Dykstra, Wilma Visscher Smith (class of '25).*



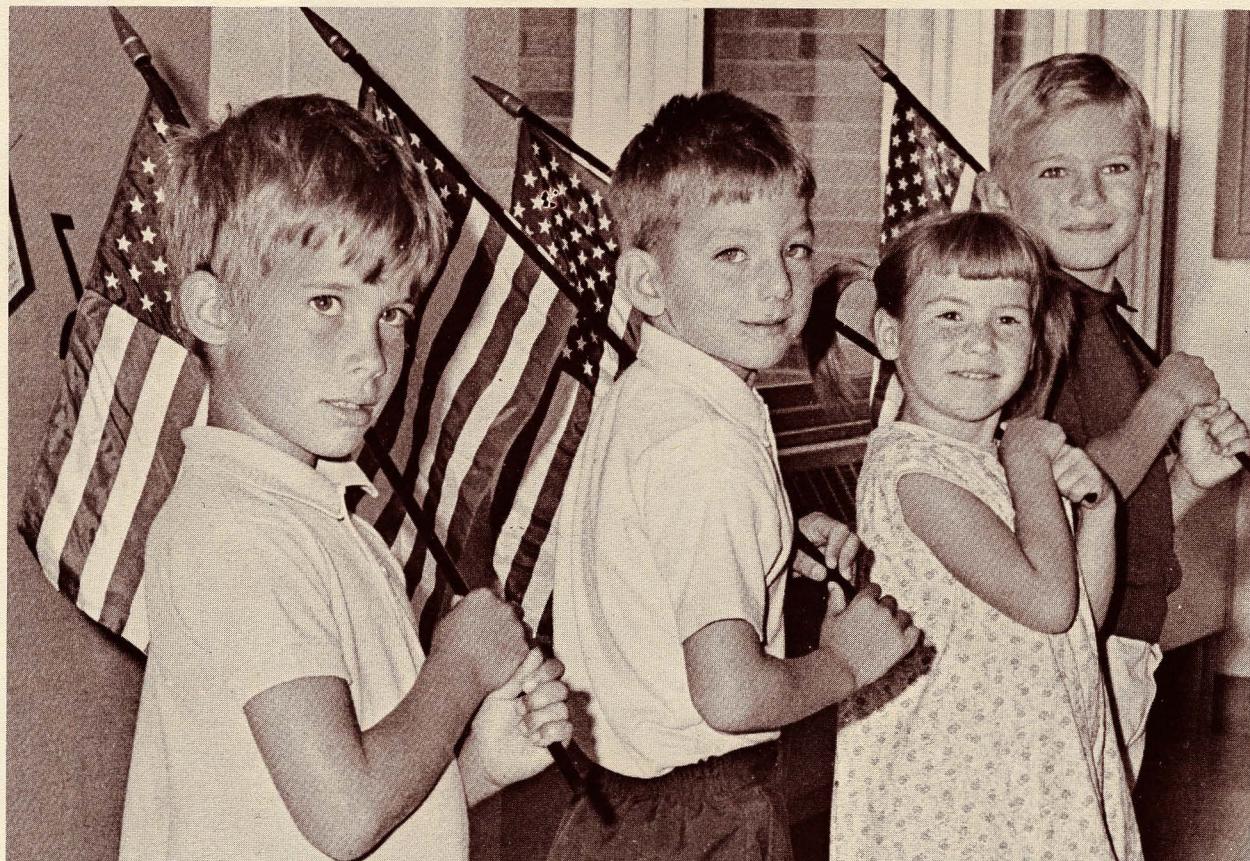
second volume was published in 1900 and was so lengthy and complicated that it was probably ignored. Except for those two efforts, the wisdom of local curriculum control has been recognized by state officials, allowing the curriculum to be adapted to the different conditions within each school district.

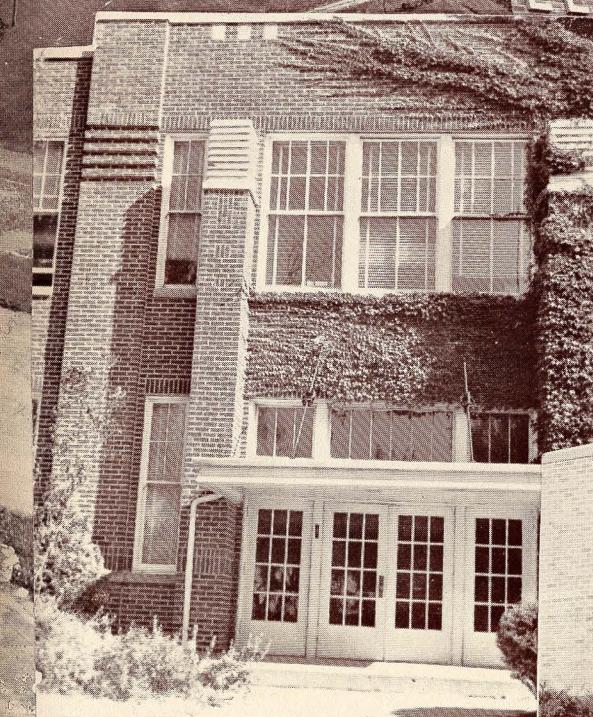
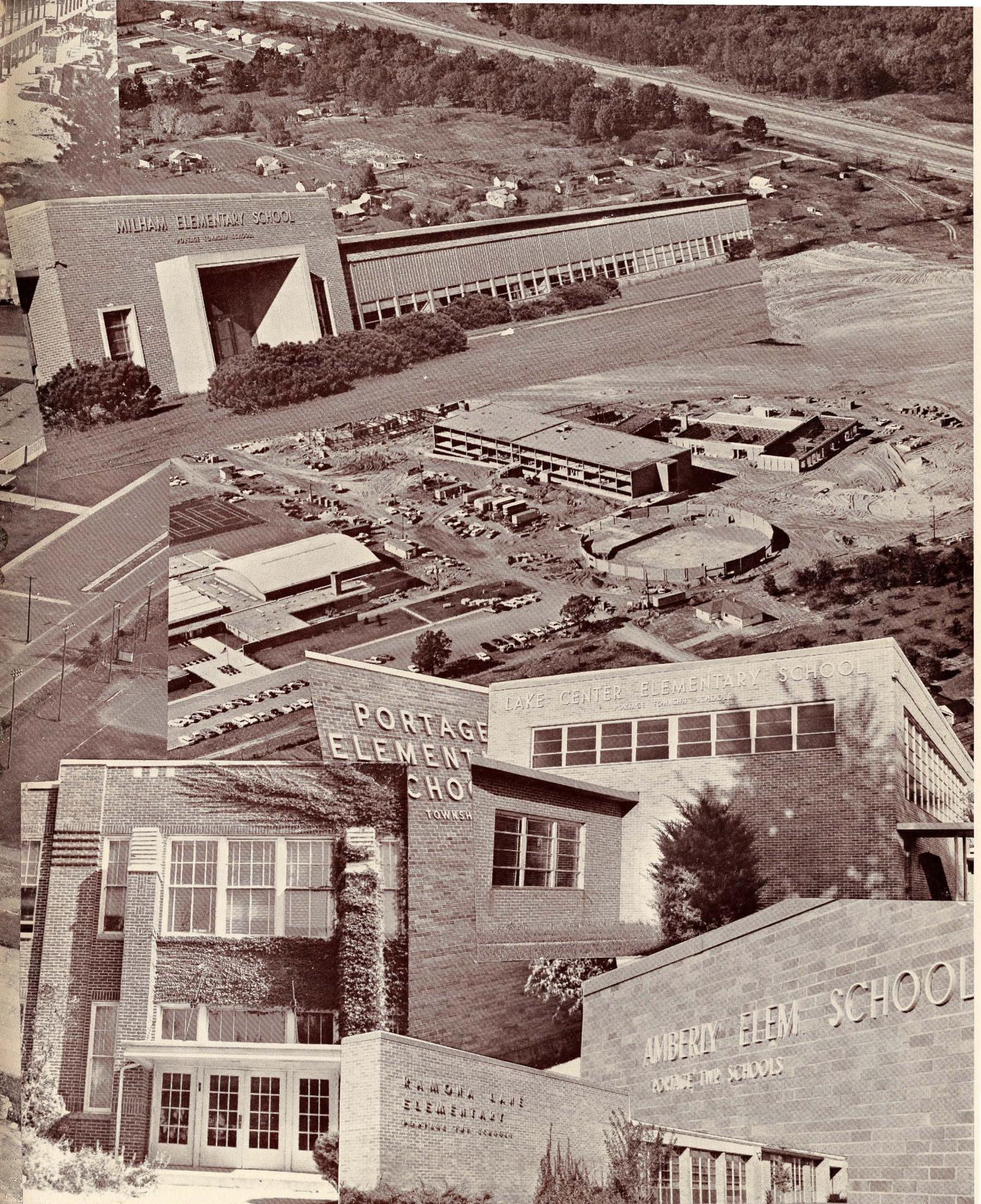
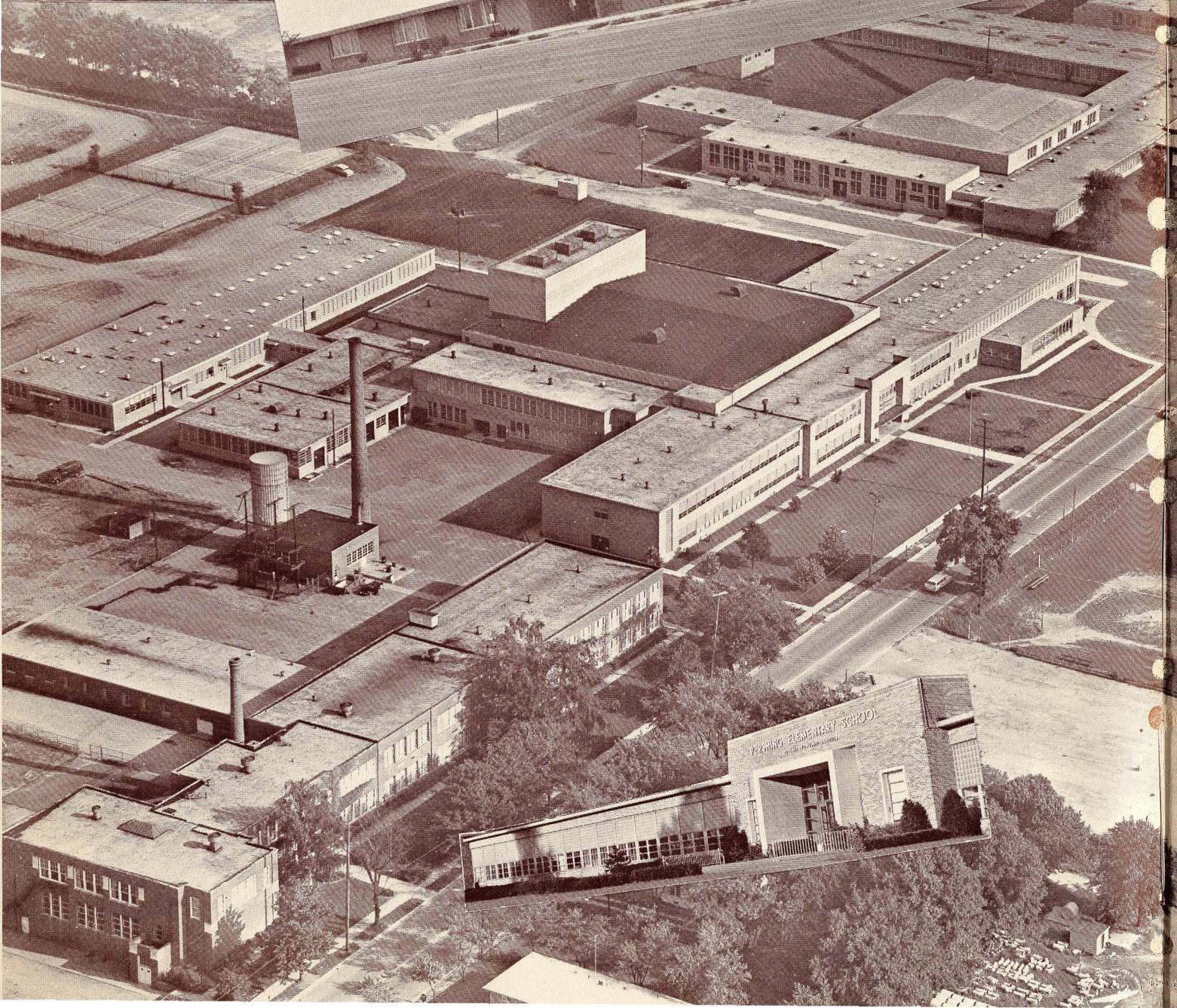
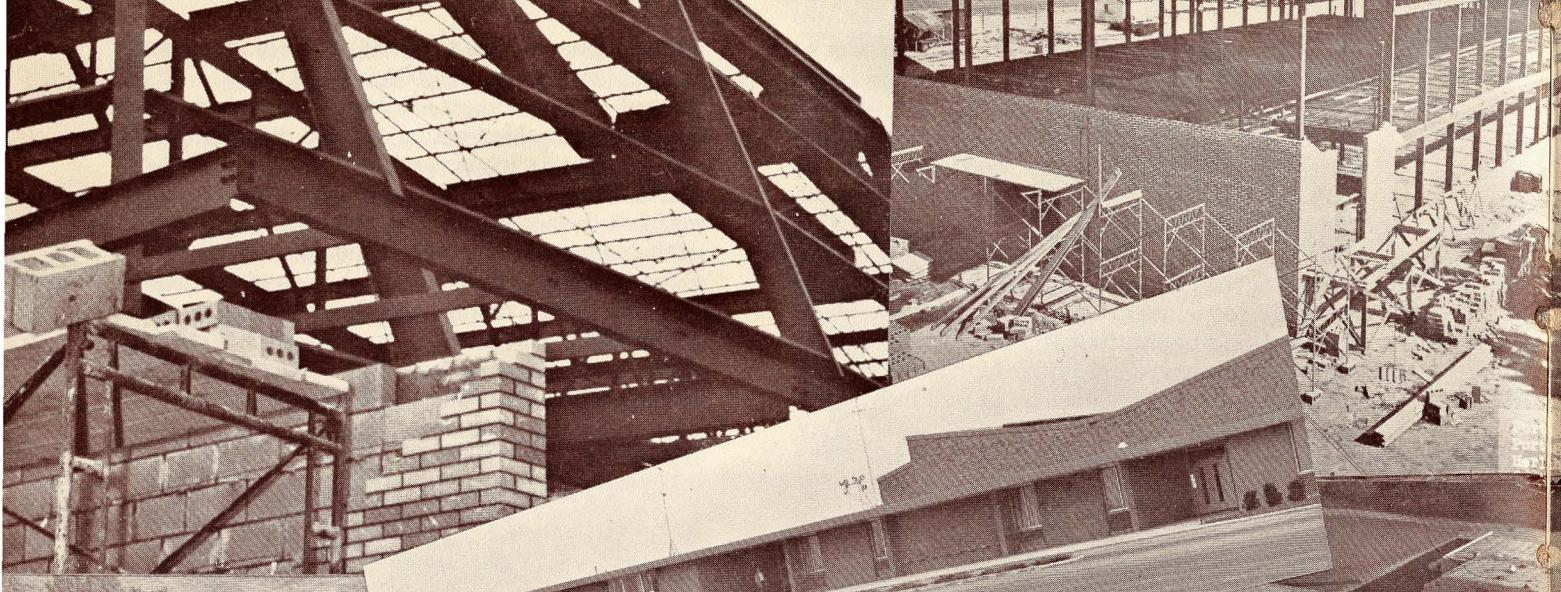
George Conti assumed the duties of superintendent of the Portage Public Schools in 1970. He presently cooperates with a seven member board of education in educating 10,864 young people in eleven elementary, three junior high and two high schools. The current valuation of buildings, sites

and equipment is \$44,000,000 and the operating budget is nearly \$15,000,000. Almost eighty percent of this budget is allocated to salaries for nearly 600 teachers and about 200 other employees. Dr. Conti's job is vastly different from that of Rufus Rice, the first teacher almost 150 years ago; but the concern for the education and growth of the community's youth demonstrated by Caleb Sweetland and Elijah Root, when they established those first two log cabin schools, persists today. This concern has supported the growth and development of a school system in which Portage citizens justifiably take great pride.



1975-76 Board of Education. From left: Superintendent George Conti, Louis Boyer, Robert Goldacker, President Gayl Werme, Don Overlander, Vice President Richard Glass, Treasurer James Ellinger, Robert Lockwood, and Secretary Ted Vliek.







# 7

---

---

## Churches and Other Organizations

---

---

When the first Indian Fields School in District No. 1 was completed in about 1833, Elder Winchell, who lived near Kilgore Road, held church services there every Sunday Morning. Later on, Sunday school classes were held in the building. Now and then Elder Winchell went to other townships to hold services and Elder Merrill from Kalamazoo township would take his place. It is not known how long church services were held in District No. 1 school but, according to old histories, school houses were often used for this purpose. The service was usually conducted by ruling elders of the Methodist church.

In the early years of Kalamazoo village there was a somewhat different situation. The first church services were also held in the schoolhouse but after a year or two a small white church was erected on South Street. Depending on the membership in a particular year its denomination changed between Presbyterian and Congregational. About a decade later the Congregationalists built a church on Academy Street, and the Presbyterians took over the little white church on South Street. According to biographies of the pioneers, several of the early settlers in Portage were members of these two Kalamazoo churches. Several were quite active in church work, and one of them was Sunday school superintendent for a number of years. It was quite a distance to travel by horse and buggy and an early start for church must have been made. It is recorded and old photographs verify that churches had horse sheds next to the church premises to stable the horses.

In all the records that are available about early Portage only four of its schools are mentioned as having been used for church services. In addition to District No. 1, discussed above, they included District No. 3 (Milham Avenue and Angling

Road), No. 4 (Oakland Drive south of Romence Road), and No. 5 (Centre and Westnedge Avenues). In 1876 William Harper began holding meetings in District No. 4 schoolhouse located on the Harvey Cooley farm on Oakland Drive. A short time later District No. 5 had Sunday school in the little brick school house on Centre Avenue. In 1876 the Reverend J. H. Wilcox from Oshtemo began holding church services on alternate Sundays in District No. 5. At the same time District No. 3 school was having services conducted on alternate Sundays by the Reverend Wilcox and the Reverend Bradner.

At the turn of the century the two groups in Districts No. 4 and No. 5 began to think about uniting and building a Methodist church. In 1902 it was decided to build the church in District No. 5 which was closer to the heart of the township. Several members from District No. 3 school and a few other citizens of Portage joined the group. The church building was started in August, 1902 and dedicated on November 30 of the same year by Reverend J. C. Floyd, District Superintendent of Kalamazoo District of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It was located on the southwest corner of Centre and Westnedge Avenues.

The members did much of the work in erecting the church. Mrs. Ruth Clementz and Mrs. Ethel Nichols recall how their father, Dan Curry, would hitch up his team of horses and drive to the church to help dig the cellar. Others laid the foundation and did the carpentry work. This first church in Portage began with a membership of fifty-one which one year later had increased to fifty-five. The congregation celebrated its first anniversary with an oyster supper which 150 people attended. The supper proved to be so popular that until 1942 there was an oyster supper

every year on Washington's birthday.

The Ladies Aid of the church began meeting at members' homes while the church was under construction, and by the time it was completed they had sewed together enough carpet rags to have a carpet woven for the church parlor. A Girls' Society and Woman's Foreign Missionary Society were later organized and in 1940 existing women's groups united to become the Woman's Society for Christian Service. That same year the

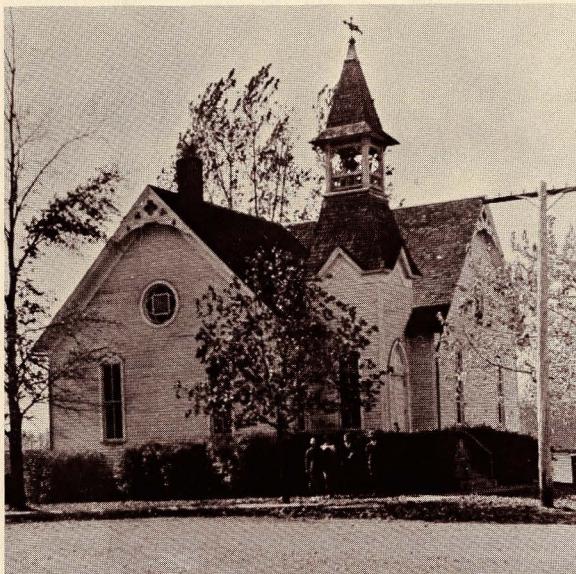
youth group, known as the Epworth League, became the Methodist Youth Fellowship. Earl Osterhout, Harold Wolbers, Mr. and Mrs. P. J. Dunn and Paul Romence were very active in making this new fellowship successful.

At first the church used oil lamps but these were replaced by electric lights in 1924. Twenty horse sheds were built in 1910 on leased land west of the building at a cost of \$350.00. Later they were sold at auction to Albert Curry for \$50.00. Much of the repair work on the church as well as the landscaping and upkeep of the grounds was done without charge by the men of the church. The building was first heated with wood, then by an oil burner; a furnace was not installed until an addition was built in 1948. At that time the rest of the church was remodeled and completely redecorated. In 1952 the parsonage was built and for the first time the Methodists had a resident minister.

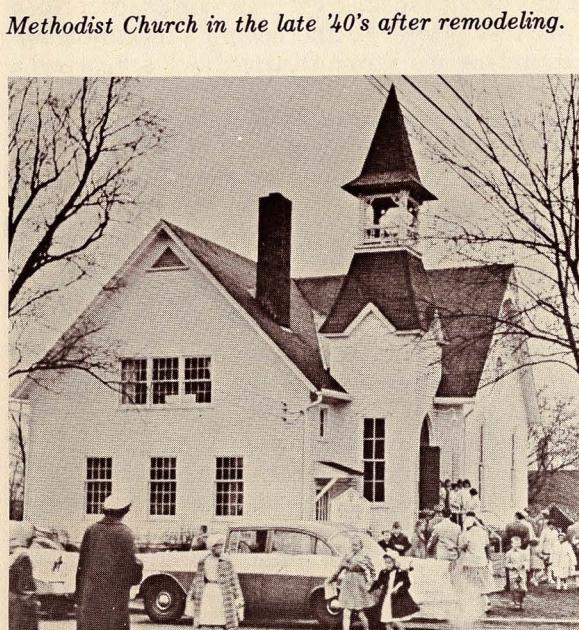
During the first three or four decades money was always in short supply. The men of the church raised money by their oyster suppers and instead of heating the church for board meetings they saved money by holding potluck suppers in their homes where they later conducted the meetings. Descendants of early Portage settlers were often among those hosting potlucks, including Daniel Curry, Harry Sweetland, J. T. Newell, Albert Snow, James Gilmore and Frank Bacon.

The church women were not far behind in their work for the church. On one occasion in 1915 Mrs. Maude Glenn wrote a charming little chronicle concerning a sale of baked goods and farm produce held in order to wipe out a deficit in the church budget. Many names of early Portage settlers appear including Bishop, Beckley, Chubb, Romence, Snow, Gilmore, Bacon, Sweetland, Campbell and Curry. There is no doubt that the congregation of that first Methodist church consisted mainly of farm families whose forefathers were early settlers in Portage. The budget for the year in which the sale was held was \$480.00, but the chronicle does not relate whether or not the deficit was wiped out. It does describe the severe drought experienced that year which caused most crops to fail. By 1919 the budget had increased to \$600.00. The mortgage on the church building was burned in 1949.

In the decades that followed Portage began to experience some of the growth that would change the township from an agricultural community into a city of homes and industries. In spite of two additions, the church was so crowded by 1958 that it was decided to move to a new site on Westnedge Avenue about a mile south of Centre Avenue. The new church was dedicated in 1966 and today the Portage United Methodist Church has a membership of about 800. It is interesting to note that there are a number of members living



*Portage United Methodist Church—The original building was erected in 1902 at Centre and Westnedge.*



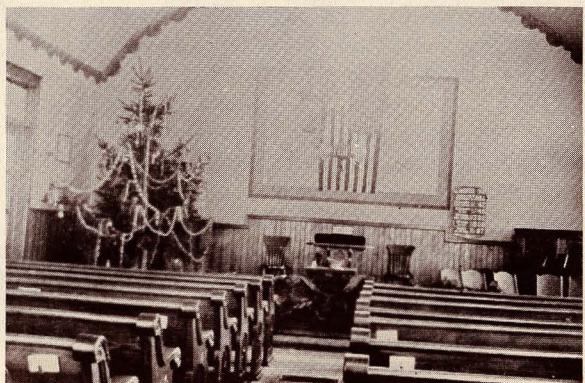
*Methodist Church in the late '40's after remodeling.*

in Kalamazoo. Aside from three Matteson families no descendants of the earlier pioneers seem to have continued their membership. Of the later Portage arrivals who were very active when the church began, Paul and Thelma Romence and one son remain on the membership rolls.

In about 1885 to 1890 the first few Dutch families moved into Portage with the intention of preparing marsh land for raising celery. They settled mostly along Schuring Road and on the east side of Westnedge Avenue. When their efforts were less than successful, some moved back to Kalamazoo. From about 1895 until the turn of the century, others moved in and settled in the vicinity of what is now Portage Plaza and along Centre Avenue. This group seems to have been quite successful and formed the nucleus of a much larger group that came in the early 1900's. A few of the families kept their connections with Kalamazoo's Reformed churches but the distances were a disadvantage. In the spring of 1902 Reverend H. Douwstra of the Third Reformed Church of Kalamazoo began coming to Portage every Wednesday evening to hold services in District No. 5 schoolhouse. They were well attended. In the fall the group meeting in the school requested the approval of the classis of Grand River to organize and be admitted as a

mission station. After that a student from Western Theological Seminary in Holland conducted both morning and evening services in the schoolhouse on Sundays. The Methodists met in the afternoon. By April of 1903 the group wished to organize as a congregation and in June this took place with an initial membership of 17.

In November, 1903, the first pastor arrived from Iowa and met his new congregation which



*Interior and exterior of the Methodist Church.  
Pictured are Etta and Henry Wolbers.*



had already decided to build a church of its own. A small white church was erected on the site of the present building on Westnedge Avenue near Centre, and a parsonage was built in 1905. The sanctuary was not completed until 1910 when the third pastor Reverend J. J. Menning arrived from Iowa. Before he left in 1915 there were forty-four families in the congregation with over one hundred members.

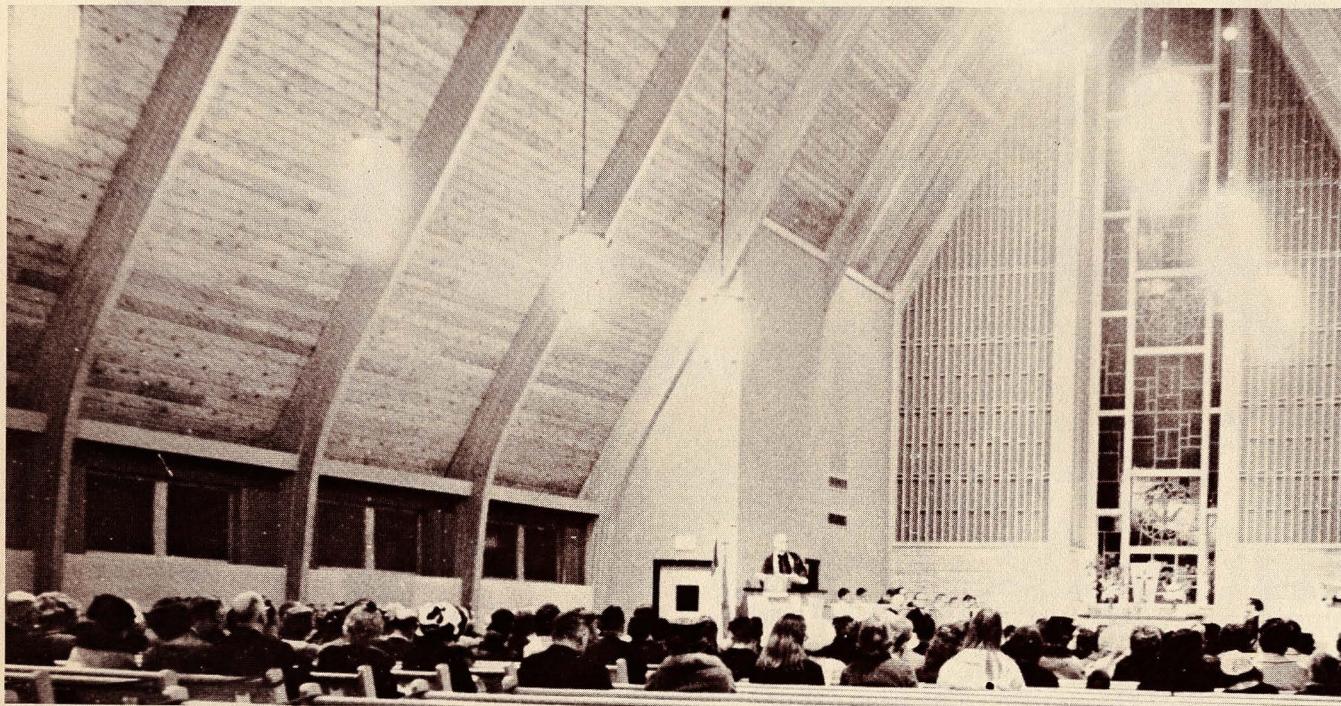
The following fifteen years saw a tremendous growth in the church. By its thirtieth anniversary in 1933, there were 98 families in the congregation with 203 communicant members and 245 non-communicants. There were 269 enrolled in the Sunday school. The budget for that year was \$3,028.81 for the church alone not including over \$800.00 in contributions to various denomination-wide causes. No longer a mission church, it had become self-supporting as well as contributing to the mission board of the church. The Reformed Church of America has a long history of both local and foreign mission work. Established in New York in 1628 by the Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam, it is the oldest Protestant denomination in America with a continuous ministry.

During the first thirty years of growth the church had been considerably enlarged, a new wing had been added and a much larger parsonage had been built. Oil lamps and stoves no longer lighted and heated the building and many modern conveniences had been installed. Throughout this period the societies of the church also grew and

their members almost invariably bore the names of early Dutch celery farmers. They were active in giving support to special church projects. The Ladies Aid held a sale each year as well as collecting from every member at its bi-weekly meetings. In 1933 the society collected ten cents per person from each of its 28 members. With this money it contributed to the upkeep of the parsonage and helped needy families in the church. The Missionary Society, with a membership of 18 in 1933, met once a month and its efforts were directed toward furthering the missionary projects of the denomination. The Men's Society met every Tuesday evening during the winter months. Its meetings were held strictly in the Dutch language, and its main purpose was to broaden members' understanding of the Bible. There were two youth groups. The Christian Endeavour met every Sunday evening and, although total membership was 40, attendance averaged 25. The girls outnumbered the boys by about four to one. The Church League for Service, composed of the young girls of the church, devoted its time to missionary causes and local welfare work.

The church was a close-knit group and through the years there was a great deal of inter-marriage among the young people. In 1966 the church had 185 families and a large church school was added to the new church which had been built in 1950. Since then the congregation has continued to grow and at present has well over 200 families.

*Interior of the present Methodist Church dedicated in 1966.*





*First Reformed Church of Portage and parsonage. The church was built in the early 1900's on Westnedge near Centre.*

*First Reformed Church and parsonage after remodeling.*



Many of these families are the descendants of the early celery farmers. Two of the Schurings were charter members and today at least fourteen families belonging to the church can claim some relationship to them. Mrs. Anna Posthumus, formerly Anna Schuring, is perhaps the oldest member of the Schuring family and a lifelong member of the church. The Kuiper family is a close second in number of Reformed Church members followed by the Hoeksema, Dykstra and Elzinga families, all descendants of early celery farmers. Some of these families are still using the muckland to grow vegetable and flower plants but a great many are engaged in other enterprises.

While the two pioneer churches were increasing rapidly in membership, a similar population growth was experienced throughout the township. Many of the newcomers continued their memberships in Kalamazoo churches, but some joined the two established Portage churches and others wanted churches of their own faith. Many Kalamazoo churches began small mission groups which grew rapidly into self-supporting congregations. Most of the young Portage churches met in school buildings until they could afford to build their places of worship.

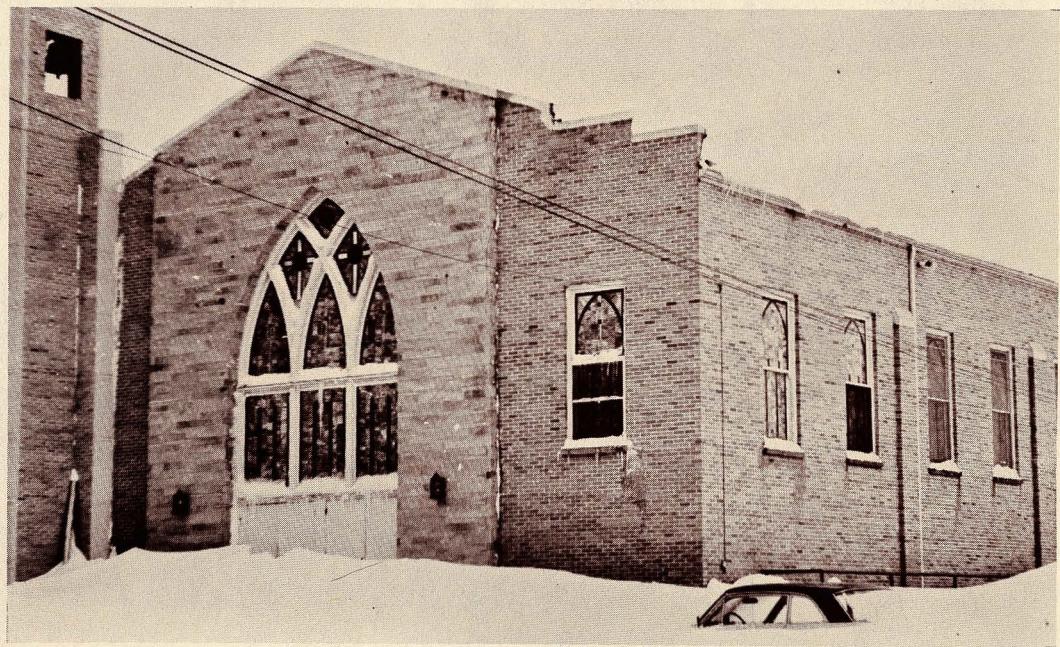
Although the Methodist and the Reformed churches are the most significant to early Portage history, many others have joined them in recent years in contributing vitally to community life. There are now five Baptist and four Lutheran congregations. Other churches serving Portage citizens today include Christian Reformed, Episcopal, Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregational, Church of Christ and several other denominations. (See Appendix for complete list of Portage

churches.) The two lone white churches which stood very near each other at the turn of the century have now increased to more than thirty in number. Those early churches were the spiritual and social life of a growing community and the members did much to mold the standards of its citizens.

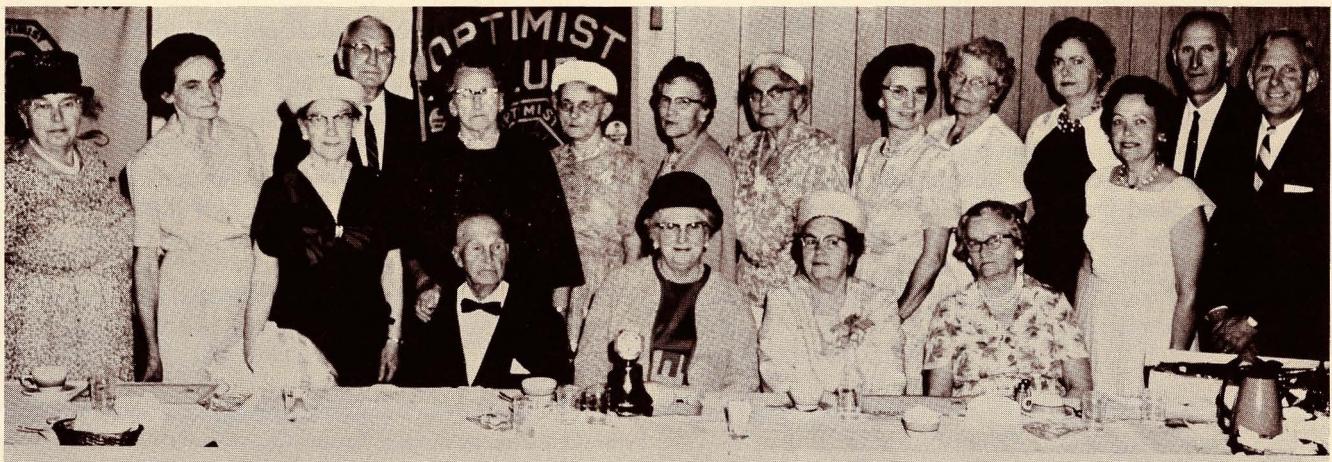
Located very near the original Methodist Church on Centre Avenue were two other buildings that were influential in the development of Portage. One was the Grange Hall, where the farmers of the community met for a number of years. The grange suppers were famous and the farmers' wives did the baking and cooking. There were no packaged mixes in those days, and the women vied with one another to see who could



*Masonic Hall built in 1930 to replace an older wooden structure.*



*Record snow storm of 1967 even closed Portage churches. Note buried car in front of First Reformed Church.*



*Optimists honor retired local educators.*

turn out the most mouth watering cakes and pies. Perhaps homemade bread or biscuits and home churned butter adorned each table. The Grange Hall and the society which it housed have long since disappeared but Grange chapters are still active in many agricultural communities.

The second historic building on Centre Avenue is the Masonic Hall, which was built in 1930 to replace an earlier building. According to the lodge secretary of fifty years, William Bonte, the older wooden building had been used at various times in its history not only by the Masons but by the township board, the Grange society and as the township's only polling place. The present building is used by the Masons and the Order of the Eastern Star for meetings and other activities. For a short period of time this building housed the kindergarten of the Portage Agricultural School, which was over-crowded. Instituted in 1876, the Portage Masonic Lodge will celebrate its centennial year at the same time the United States is celebrating its Bicentennial. Most citizens who lived in the central and southeastern sections of Portage were lodge members in bygone years, and today the membership numbers about 235.

Another long-lived association in Portage was established as part of a state-wide organization for women sponsored by Michigan State University. Called the Home Extension Club, various township groups were affiliated with the County Home Extension Department which in turn was associated with similar agencies in other counties. Originally composed chiefly of farmers' wives, the club met in members' homes; and the extension service provided speakers and new ideas in homemaking. Now and then, all the township groups met together for lunch in the Kalamazoo County Recreation Building. These luncheons were looked forward to by the members and a different group took charge of each meal. The

Portage group still meets regularly and continues to be affiliated with the county and state organizations. Two charter members, Mrs. Leona Pound and Mrs. Bird Corbus, remain active; and the former Margaret Linsell, for many years the county extension agent, is a member.

Two of the larger women's groups in the city are the Portage Newcomers' Club and the Portage Women's Club. Both are actively concerned with the welfare of the city and are interested in the advancement of cultural and social programs. Portage women also participate in the activities of various Kalamazoo organizations. Several Portage women belong to the Ladies Library Association in Kalamazoo, one of the oldest federated women's clubs in the United States and the owner of the first club building built specifically for women in this country. The Kalamazoo branch of the American Association of University Women also includes a number of Portage members, including Mayor Betty Ongley.

Service groups for businessmen have been part of Portage for some years. Optimists, Lions, Rotarians, Kiwanians and AMBUCS have active organizations in the city. All of these groups work hard for the advancement of the community and some concentrate on special projects benefiting youth. The Veterans of Foreign Wars has been active in Portage for a number of years, as well as the Jaycees and the Percolator Club, a Chamber of Commerce organization. As with the women citizens of Portage, the men are also active in numerous Kalamazoo organizations.

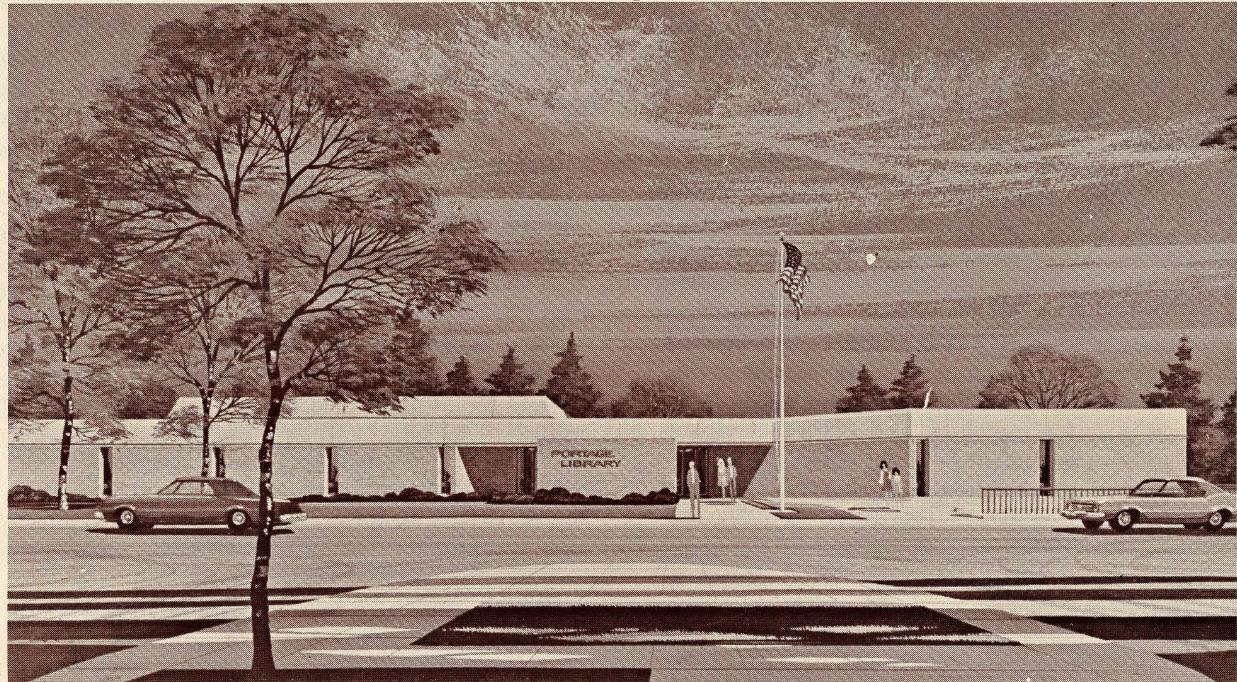
Perhaps the designation of the most persistent citizens' group best belongs to the Friends of the Library. Not especially old in years, this group organized with one purpose in mind. From the very beginning, its cause was to establish a public library for Portage. In about 1960 members began collecting books and storing them in an empty

house on Westnedge Avenue. In the meantime they located an empty building on Milham Avenue which was repaired and readied by volunteers using money donated by various groups and individuals for materials and equipment. The books collected by the group along with some borrowed from the state library were moved in, and the Portage Public Library opened its doors on April 1, 1962. For the first two years it was a private subscription library with patrons purchasing membership for a small fee.

When the Milham Avenue building became crowded, the library was moved in 1963 to its present location in Portage Plaza. It soon became apparent that the fast growing library would

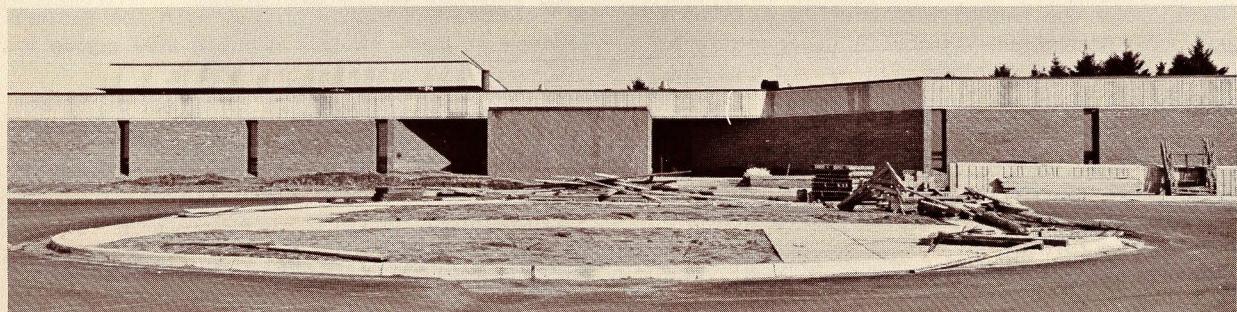
outgrow its second location. The persistence of the founders of Friends of the Library was successful again, and the Portage City Council was finally persuaded to seek voter approval to construct a new library building. Defeated once, the millage issue passed the second time, and a dedication ceremony for the new library is planned for the spring of 1976 as part of Portage's celebration of the United States Bicentennial.

Frank Hemphill, who assumed the duties of librarian in 1966, expects to have a small room in the new building set aside to house historical documents and pictures of Portage. With staff member Olive Halstead coordinating local efforts, the library is participating with a regional group



*Architect's sketch of new library scheduled to open in 1976.*

*Portage's new library under construction.*



of libraries in an oral history project in which interviews with the older citizens of Portage are being tape recorded. These records will be preserved as a source of information and human interest stories for future students of history.

In addition to the many service organizations in

Portage, there are other groups which formed as a result of common social or recreational interests. In a variety of ways, Portage has the atmosphere of a young, growing city with no lack of interaction between its citizens.



*Above and right, Portage Public Library in Portage Plaza.*

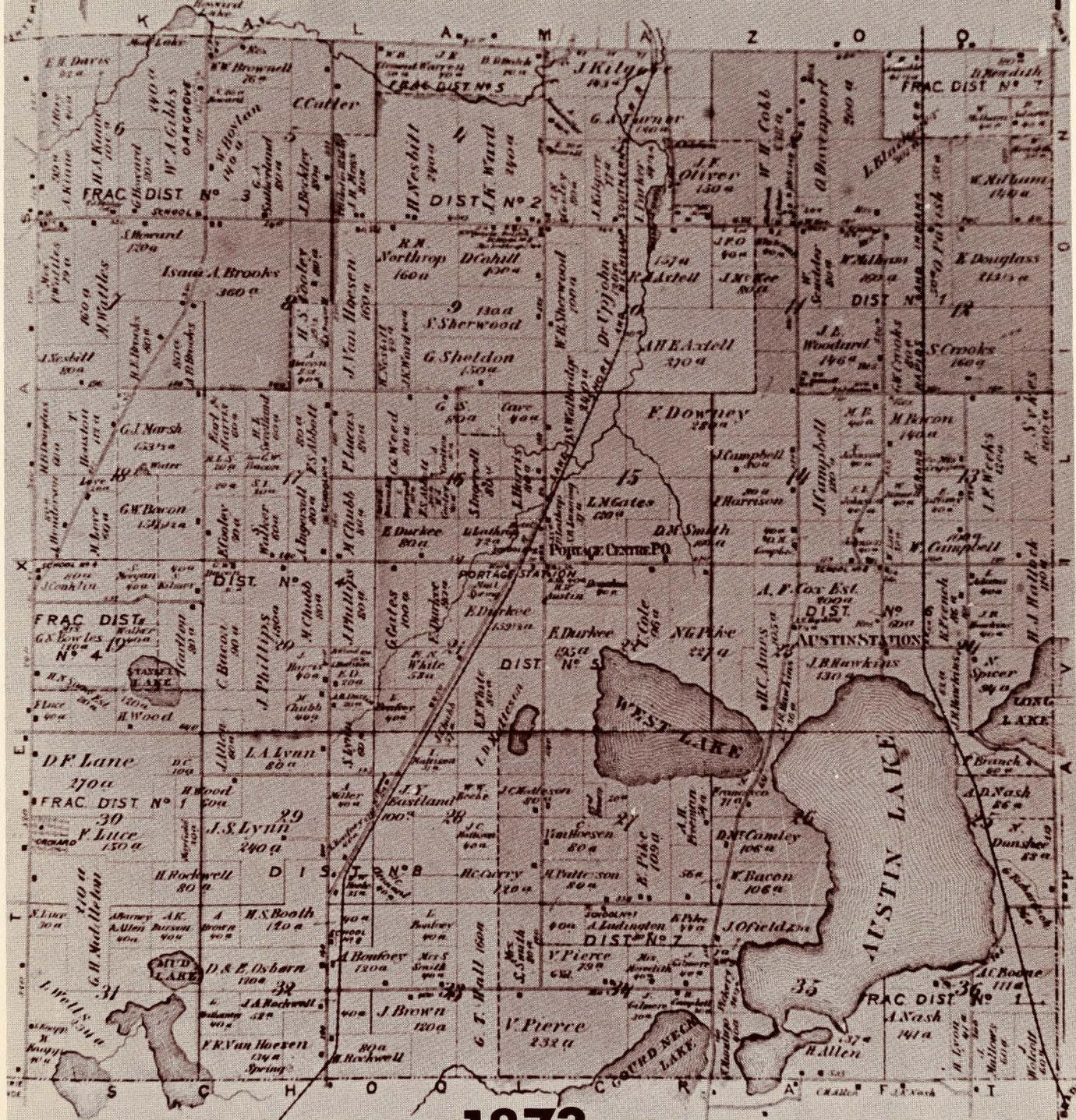


*Friends of the Library, Jim Wilson (at left) and Hugh Harper, on moving day from the first library on Milham Avenue near Kirkshire to its next location in Portage Plaza.*



# Township III South PORTAGE Range XI West

Scale 1 1/2 inches to the mile



**1873**

# 8

---

---

## From Township to City

---

---

One day in March of 1838 Moses Austin asked the first Portage settlers to meet at his home on Austin Lake to discuss the idea of becoming a separate township rather than remaining in Pavilion Township. With the exception of Vaydor Pierce and William Bishop, Austin was about the only settler in the southern portion of the township. Eli Harrison and Moses Pike both owned land in the central portion along what is now Centre Avenue. The rest of the early pioneers lived in the northern one third, their homes for the most part facing what is now Milham Avenue. A few had built their homes in Indian Fields, on tracts in Dry Prairie or on what is now Angling Road. No doubt the majority traveled to McKee's Corners, then turned south on the most used Indian trail that is now Portage Road. Perhaps some came on horseback and others in wagons pulled by oxen or horses. Apparently all participants were in full agreement with Austin's proposal. Even his suggestion of naming the new township *Portage* had their approval.

After some discussion about the need for a separate township, the settlers drew up a request to withdraw from Pavilion Township and form their own township board under the name of Portage. This request was sent to the year old state legislature and was at once approved. In April of the same year the first township meeting was held at the home of Elijah Root, who lived near his sawmill on Portage Creek, north of the present Milham Avenue. Perhaps conditions were a bit crowded, for after electing Moses Austin chairman and Caleb Sweetland clerk they moved on to Ebenezer Stone's tavern about ten rods farther west.

After electing officers the citizens of the new township of Portage proceeded to take care of the

problems facing them. After voting to fence in the burying grounds they turned their attention to a never ending problem of early rural life, damage to property by animals. Wolves drew a bounty of five dollars each but domestic animals were also a source of destruction and annoyance to the pioneers. First of all a strict law was enacted which stipulated that all fences must be four and one half feet high with no more than four inches between the rails of the lower two and one half feet. Pathmasters were appointed as fence viewers to enforce this law, and fence viewing was also one of the duties of the overseers of roads. Elijah Root was to be poundmaster and keep stray animals in his barnyard until claimed by the owner. All boars over three months that ran at large would be forfeited to the person rounding them up. In the first six or seven years of the settlement, the pig population had multiplied very rapidly and had become a menace. There were nine pathfinders in the new township that first year but in one decade the number had increased to twenty, and in 1856 twenty-two were listed. In both 1848 and 1856 several new names appeared. Ebenezer Durkee, Francis Downey, Alonzo Bonfoey, Nathan Pike, the Bacons and the Ludingtons were listed as overseers of highways, all living in the southern half of the township. Durkee owned hundreds of acres of land and at one time served as station master and postmaster.

In spite of the increase in overseers of fences and roads, problems remained. Animals continued to stray, fences were not mended and the people in charge received many complaints. In 1842 and again in 1847 each farmer was given a brand and directed by law to brand all of his animals, a requirement ignored by some of the

farmers. About forty-two different brands were assigned to the farmers to be used on the animals' ears. By 1884 Charles Beckley was poundmaster and a busy time he must have had. One year D. C. Pierce had five black hogs invade his property. He would not turn them over to the pound until he collected twenty-five cents a piece for keeping them. About the same time Mary Cox had five heifers and two cows trample down her fields and she was quite bitter about the incident. She demanded recompense or she would keep a cow. That same year some thirty sheep and five lambs broke into an enclosure on R.B. Watson's farm. Records indicate that every type of animal strayed including bulls, horses, colts, oxen, sows, steers and dozens of pigs. Wolves also remained a problem with the bounty being raised to fifteen dollars a scalp in 1851.

Sometimes the fence viewers posted the names of the farmers whose fences were in bad repair and they were then threatened with court action. Apparently the farmers paid their fines and perhaps repaired their fences because records do not indicate their appearance before the judge, or constable, as he was called. Elijah Root almost went to court in 1850 because he had not paid the fifty dollars assessed him for that portion of the bridge across Portage Creek which crossed his land. Apparently part of the bridge was not on his property and paid for by the township; the other part crossed his land and he was charged for that section. No doubt to avoid trouble, he paid.

During these early years the township board, consisting of supervisor, clerk and treasurer, met only once a year in April. At that time the citizens of Portage met with them and voiced their complaints, demanded new laws or disagreed about the taxes they were obliged to pay. In 1857 the tax assessment for both township and county had reached \$2,167.13 and some thought this excessive. By this time with the exception of the marsh lands and some wood lots, most of the land had been turned into productive farms by permanent settlers. Fences were still a problem and animals were still escaping. In 1856 a petition had been presented to the road commissioners complaining about the very poor condition of the roads and demanding that something be done to improve them. The complaints concerned chiefly the marshy places which caused wagons and horses to bog down. The road commissioners were appointed by the township board and they, in turn, appointed the overseers of roads. The job of the overseers was to see that fences were kept in good repair and that farmers kept the section of road passing their property in acceptable condition. There were two justices of the peace whose duty was to arbitrate when necessary.

School inspectors, overseers of the poor and constables were other appointive offices. Old 102

records indicate that for three decades Daniel Cahill, Rossiter Howard, Vaydor Pierce, Ezra Carpenter, Harvey Booth and Elijah Root were never without a township office and often held two offices during the same year. Moses Austin, Martin Lathrop, Stephen Howard, Samuel Crooks and Ebenezer Durkee were all active in politics, and Caleb Sweetland was a school inspector as long as he remained in Portage.

The only year before the Civil War in which a special meeting of the township board was called was 1849. In May of that year Isaac Brooks received the resignation of the two road commissioners, Rossiter Howard and Isaac Chaffee. James Campbell and Charles Cutler, who were fairly new settlers, were selected at the meeting to take their places and were required to appoint all new fence viewers and road overseers. The unusual length of the meeting suggests that there were a number of disagreements. That same year a census of children counted 174 children between ages four and eighteen, and Portage Township received \$57.42 of Primary School Fund money for four school districts. Just one year later in 1850 there were 239 children of school age and \$130.33 was received from the Primary School Fund for six school districts. That year the school inspectors determined boundaries for the school districts. All through the years the township board voted money for the maintenance of the eastern and western graveyards, now known as Indian Fields and Dry Prairie Cemeteries, respectively. Every year a citizen was appointed as sexton and he was responsible for keeping the graveyard fences in repair.

During the Civil War there was a series of extra meetings of the township board. One was called to raise money for the United States government for war purposes. Another meeting was held to consider the still existing problems of fences and escaped animals. The commissioners of highways became poundmasters. They were to receive twenty-five cents for each hog impounded plus twelve and one half cents per head for feed. If the animals were not claimed within twenty-four hours, public notice in writing was to be posted in three places. After ten days the poundmaster could sell the animals and claim his fee, with any money remaining to be paid to the lawful owner.

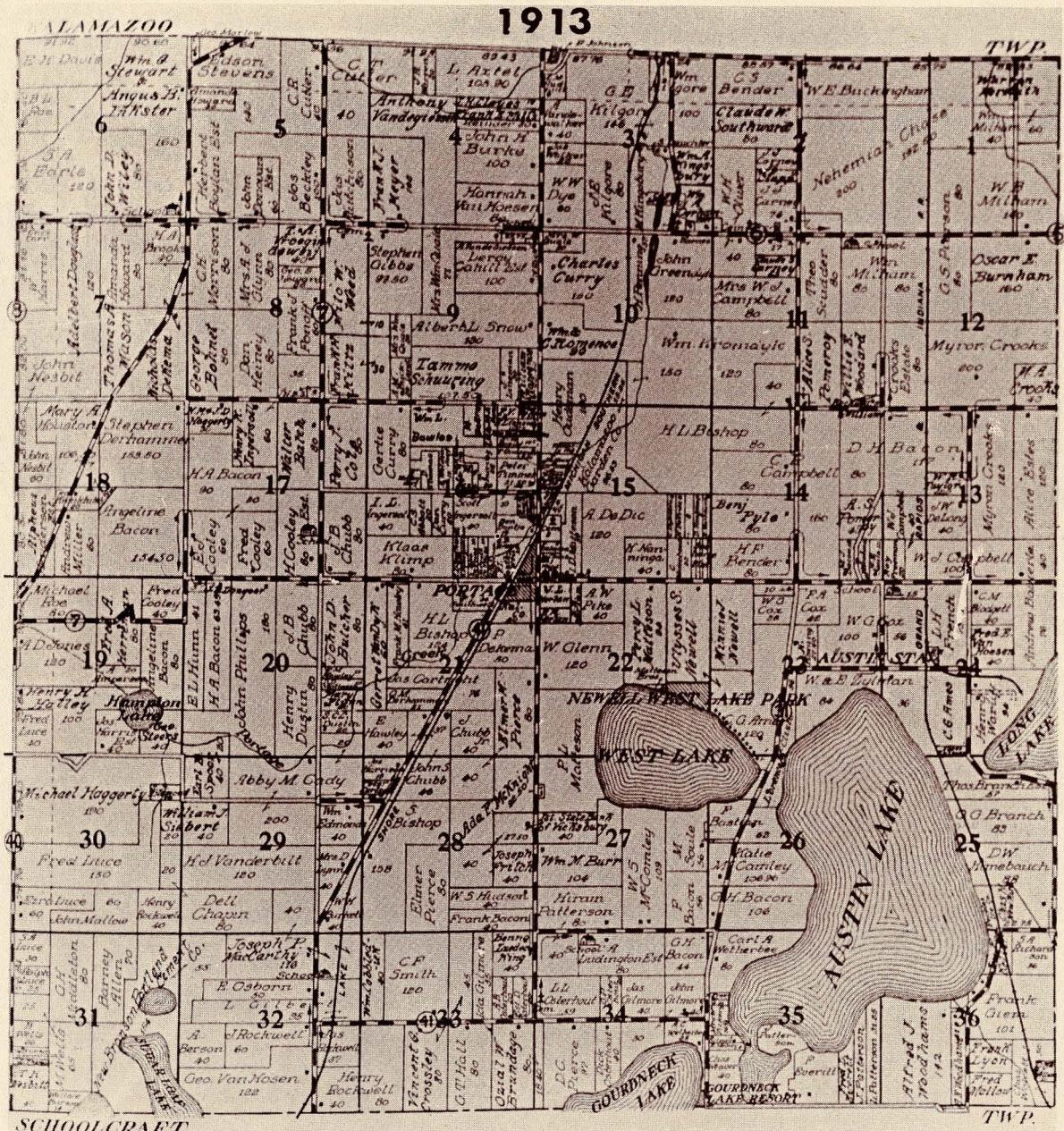
In 1864 another special meeting was held to discuss the desirability of having the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad pass through Portage. After an additional meeting to discuss the proposition, it was approved. In 1866 a meeting was held to discuss the sale of \$10,000 in railroad bonds to underwrite the project which was approved.

During the next decade, 1865-1875, there were very few new problems brought up before the township board by the citizens. In 1874 the

number of overseers of highways was increased to twenty-eight. Only Nathan Pike, John Woodard, George Middleton and John Hawkins remained from earlier lists, but Harvey Cooley and Dwight Pierce, whose fathers had served as township officials, were now active in politics. Many other new names appeared, including Ira Matteson, Sam Crooks and the Kilgores, who were all early settlers and had moved frequently from one location in the township to another. Once again in 1883 there was an increase in the number of overseers to thirty. Both Julius Matteson and William Kilgore replaced their fathers and only Stephen Howard, William Milham and Ebenezer Pike remained of the pioneers. By this time taxes

had again increased and a new law concerning roads had been passed. By keeping the road near his property scraped and in reasonable repair a farm owner could work off part of his taxes. Allen Milham relates that his father purchased a horse drawn road scraper when they became available to use on the road in front of the Milham Farm. When he was not using it he rented it to other farmers.

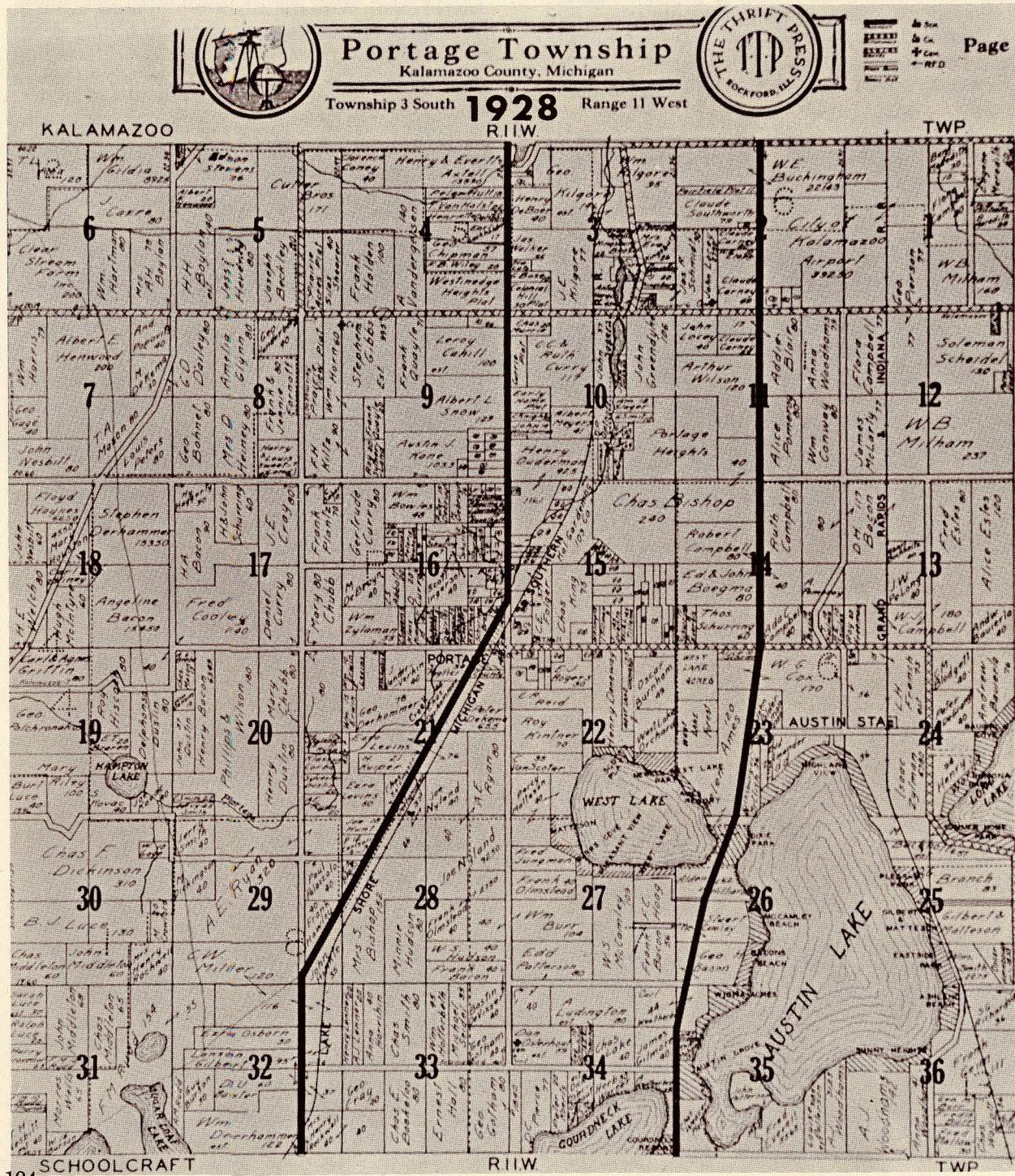
The township records from 1874 to 1921 are not available. No one in office today has any recollection of them. With the minutes beginning again in 1921 many changes are apparent from forty-seven years earlier. There is no mention of straying animals or wolves. No doubt more secure fences



had taken the place of split rail or board fences, and wolves no longer roamed in the remaining wood lots and wooded areas. The names of the township board members were new and there were many more requests from property owners often involving the graveling of roads. The road commissioners now received four dollars a day while working. Most of the meetings were held in the Town Hall, which was located on Centre Avenue near the present Masonic Lodge. Special meetings

were requested by developers of new plats and these meetings were usually in the afternoon. The three member board apparently went to inspect the plat and the road through it. In 1921 three plats were accepted and one refused. That year a special meeting was called to approve the purchase of an adding machine for \$200.

The following year, 1922, was much the same as far as the approval of new plats was concerned, but gravel for roads became a real problem. The



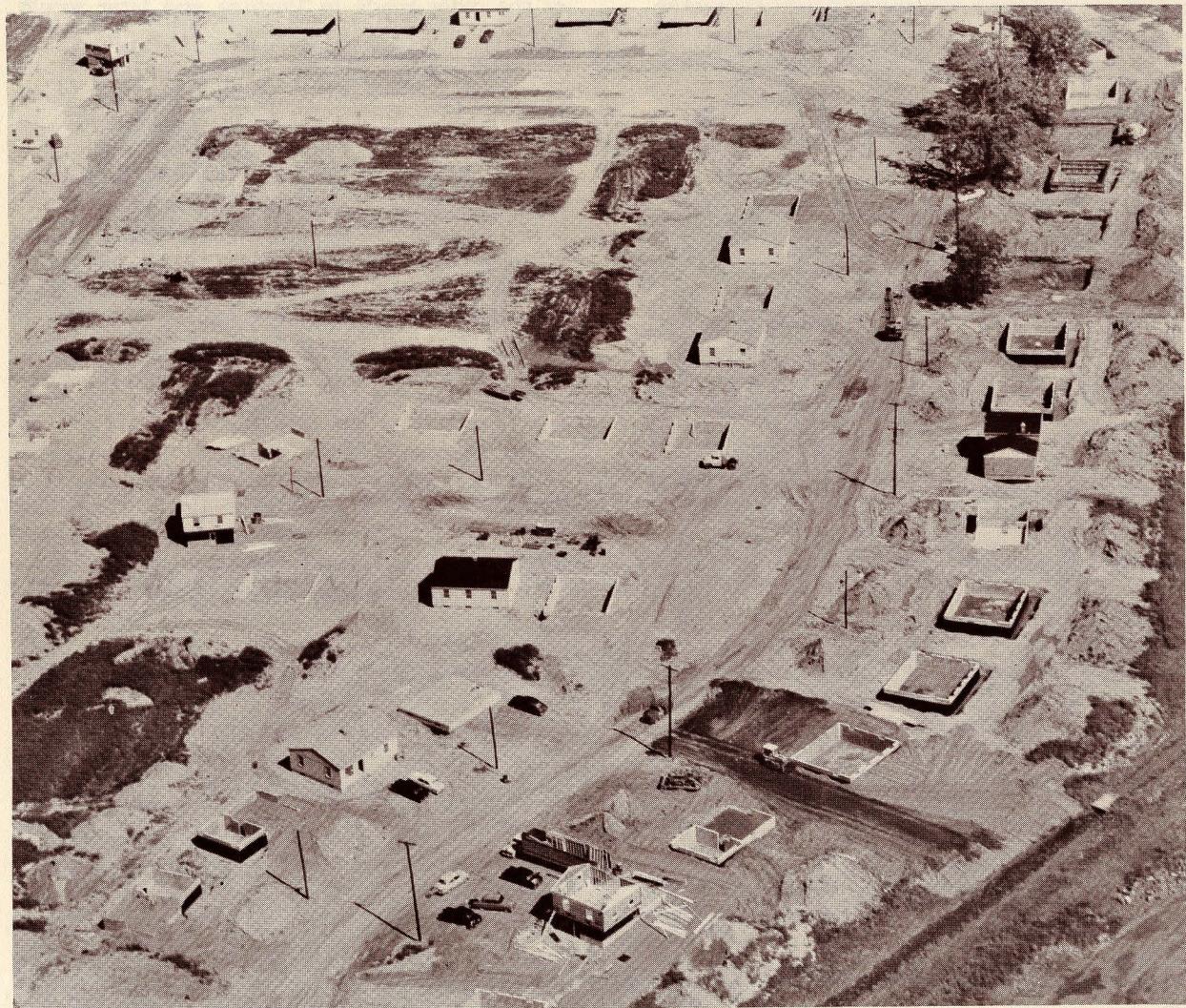
minutes state that no gravel was to be hauled from township owned pits without payment for each load. The highway fund was increased to \$3,500. The poor fund did not need money that year even though money from it was used to pay the taxes on three properties, two of them belonging to widows. After much discussion Dan Puglise received permission to operate a poolroom opposite the depot. The board stipulated that it would close at 11:00 PM; no one under eighteen years would be admitted; and no gambling, no intoxicating liquor and no profane language would be allowed. Kilgore Farms was voted out of Portage Township School District No. 2 into Kalamazoo Township Fractional School District No.6. Also in 1922 the township for the first time had to spend seventy-five dollars for a crop report required by the federal government.

In the following three years, 1924-1926, numerous plats were developed in the vicinity of the lakes. Rarely were they accepted at the first

viewing. Usually the road required more gravel or a culvert added; perhaps a tree needed to be removed or the road widened. Both Schuring & Linneman and Harm & John Schuring, Jr. had several plats accepted during these years. During the same period a law was passed that all dance halls, poolrooms and soft drink parlors needed licenses to operate. Eighteen licenses were granted in all. It was also voted that no dance halls be allowed to operate between 12:00 PM Saturday and 12:00 PM Sunday. Although the requirement for a soft drink license was soon rescinded, a liquor license law took its place; and today licensing of taverns, pubs and all establishments selling alcoholic beverages is still controlled by local government.

In 1929 money from the poor fund was used for the first time in several years when two widows received assistance to pay their grocery and doctor bills. Additional plats were developed and more road complaints were voiced by the citizens.

*Typical plat development of Portage farmland.*



Discussions were held to consider buying a gravel truck to help the road commissioners do a better job of filling in the many marshy areas. However, before any decision was made, the Town Hall was completely destroyed by fire along with nine voting booths and five ballot boxes. Unfortunately, insurance on the building had been allowed to lapse. The need for a new location in which to conduct township business led to discussions with Masonic Lodge members who had previously bought the old Grange Hall but were in the process of planning a new building. For \$3,000 in total the Lodge offered to lease the lower floor of the new building to the township for a period of ten years. When this offer was rejected, another followed of a ninety-nine year lease on the first floor if the township would pay one third of the cost of the new building which amounted to \$3,300. This offer was approved by the voters in a millage election.

During this same year, 1929, Consumers Power received permission to lay gas mains in all public highways, streets and alleys so that natural gas could be supplied to Portage citizens. This was also a year of record snowfall in Michigan and to keep roads open the township paid well over \$500 for snow plowing and also decided to order more snow fences. Cars were now using the roads instead of horse drawn sleighs, and cars did get stuck in snow drifts.



**COOLING THOUGHT . . .**  
This is a snow plow (1936 variety) used on Westnedge during a severe snowstorm.

In 1930 the township board agreed to pay for one third of the insurance on the new Masonic Lodge, one third of repair bills and all the electricity and janitor service costs incurred by the township. The same year \$6,000 was budgeted for highways which included \$500 for snow removal. An extra two mills were voted to take care of the cemeteries and for the poor fund. The Great Depression had begun and this amount was later increased to two and one half mills. Several meetings were held on the problem of the poor and suggestions made to find work for the unemployed at one dollar a day. Only road work and wood cutting seemed to be available.

During the 1920's and into the 1930's Guy Dailey, who owned the Isaac Brooks' farm at Milham Avenue and Angling Road, was the township supervisor and William J. Campbell usually held the office of clerk or treasurer. Both men were concerned about the problems of rising road maintenance costs and providing for the poor. An agreement was reached with the county that the county road commission would assume responsibility for maintenance of thirty-five miles of the older roads in Portage and later would include the other main roads on a fee basis. However, roads in new plats still had to be approved by the township and these often failed to meet the requirements set up by the board. In 1932 the problem of aid for the poor became so acute that the board met with the four local grocers, Wolbers, Dykstra, Adams and Spencer, to ask that they stock government food. They all agreed to cooperate as long as other items would be purchased from their stores, and from then on the poor were paid in food rather than money. In spite of this, in 1933 the township had to borrow money to carry on its welfare work.

Because of the tight budget one of the first actions taken by the new board in 1934 was to reduce salaries of board members from \$2.50 to \$2.00 per meeting. Salaries of road commissioners were cut from \$4.50 to \$4.00 per day worked. The board also voted to participate in a county-wide program of relief for the poor and approved an initial amount of \$6,000 for the county relief fund. Later that year the contribution was increased by \$600. In spite of the hard times several beer and liquor licenses were approved. New plats continued to be developed but developers had to pay an eight dollar fee to have the board inspect the plat. Major roads were now the responsibility of the county road commissioners so the board sold all snow fences.

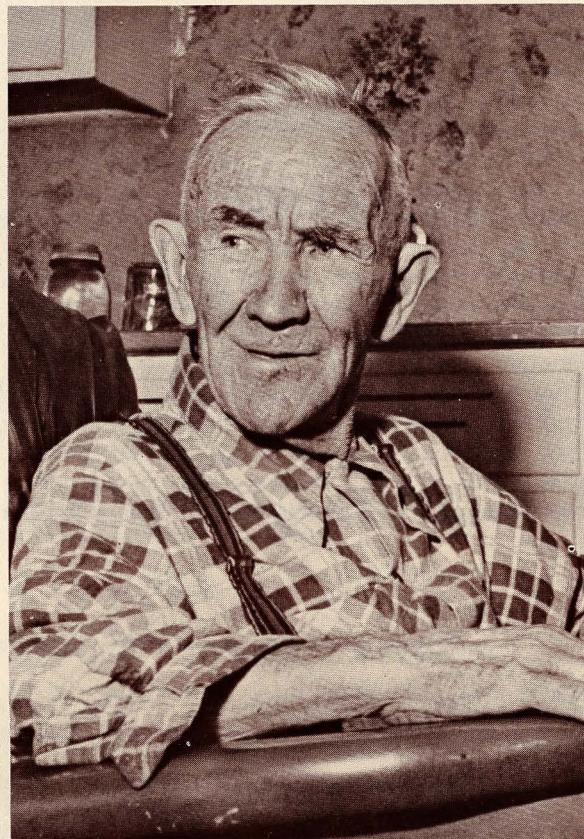
In 1936 Stuart McCamley became township supervisor, a position he held for twenty years until he was seventy-nine years old. Albert Snow was again justice of the peace along with John Visscher, elected for the first time. Most of the other officials were newcomers. Every year new

plats were approved and many beer and liquor licenses renewed.

In 1940 two permanent caretakers were hired for the cemeteries and the state highway department was asked to install traffic lights at Carpenters Corners and at Portage Road and Milham Avenue. Discussions began on purchasing fire extinguishers and other fire equipment for the township. In October the board went to Detroit to look at fire fighting equipment and in November bids were opened for a fire truck. The low bid from Helms Motor Sales of Vicksburg was accepted. In 1941 the fire station was built on Westnedge Avenue and Ernest Hall, who was caretaker of Portage Central Cemetery, became the fire chief. He held this position for only one year and in 1942 Jacob Mein was appointed chief with a staff of several volunteers. Operating procedures for the voluntary system were to be determined by the chief and he was also responsible for keeping the cemetery watered and mowed. His home was furnished by the township, including all utilities. Jake Mein, who is still Portage fire chief, is the grandson of Ben Kannegieter, one of the first celery growers in Portage. Koert Kuiper, son of another early celery grower, was assistant fire chief and his job was to relieve the chief of his duties for fifty hours each month. Today there are three fire stations, several trucks and other equipment, and twenty-two regular firemen with thirty-one volunteers. A new fire station is currently under construction on Oakland Drive just south of Milham Avenue.

While the board was determining rules and regulations for the first fire station, the members were also discussing the need for township zoning. A special election was held in July, 1941 and the citizens approved the concept of zoning by a vote

of 177 to 31. A planning board was appointed and in December its zoning plan was accepted. The following year there were so many plats up for approval and others in the process of being developed that the board felt some new measures



*Stuart McCamley was active in local affairs throughout his lifetime. McCamley Field, Portage Schools' athletic complex, was named in his honor.*

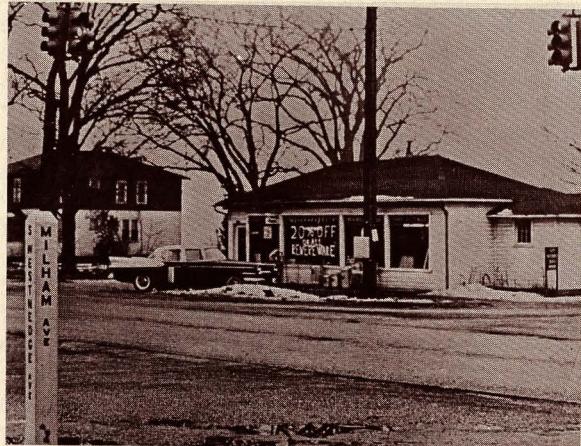
*One of Portage's four cemeteries.*



must be taken. One problem concerned naming the new streets, another the lack of street signs. Adequate lighting and traffic signals were also lacking. Portage was beginning to experience a phenomenal growth rate that would become even more dramatic in a few more years.

At one of its meetings in the summer of 1942, the board decided to buy posts and put up street signs. Before the posts were erected, a committee was appointed to make changes in the names of several streets. At the June 30, 1942 meeting a contract was made with Portage Concrete Company for the purchase of 250 posts at \$1.90 each. Stuart McCamley and Egbert DeVries were in charge of determining locations for the posts and having them erected. On August 6 of the same year a special meeting was held to discuss with a group of celery farmers the flooding of their celery lands because of the Old Mill Dam. In September another meeting was held about the Pratt Dam that was flooding some land. At both meetings motions were made to investigate the flooding and suggestions were offered on what to do about the dams. It is not known which street names were changed or what action was taken about the

flooding. Once again the minutes of the township board come to an abrupt halt and their whereabouts is unknown. By this time the board had



*Traffic light at Milham and Westnedge (Carpenter's Corners) was one of Portage's first installed about 1940. This view looks toward future Southland Mall. Pictured is Spangler Hardware.*

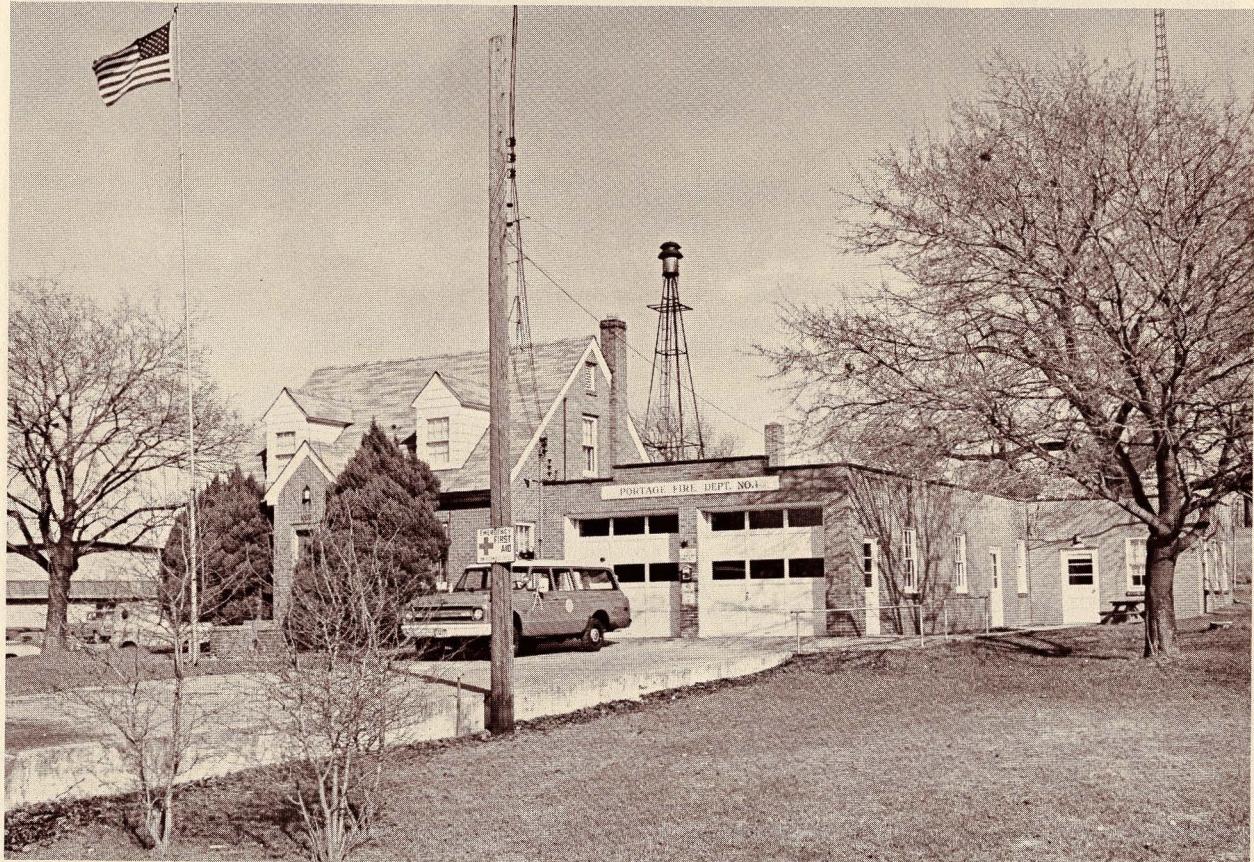
*1955 picture shows two of the fire department's three pumper trucks with several Portage firemen.*





*City officials and "Sarge" with fire department pumper. From left: Chief Jake Mein, Mayor Tony Lemmer, Counseleman John Schuring, City Manager David Firestone, and firefighter Billy Channells.*

*Portage Fire Station No. 1 built in 1941.*





*Portage school bus drivers receive first aid training from firemen.*

*Oakland Drive fire station under construction.*

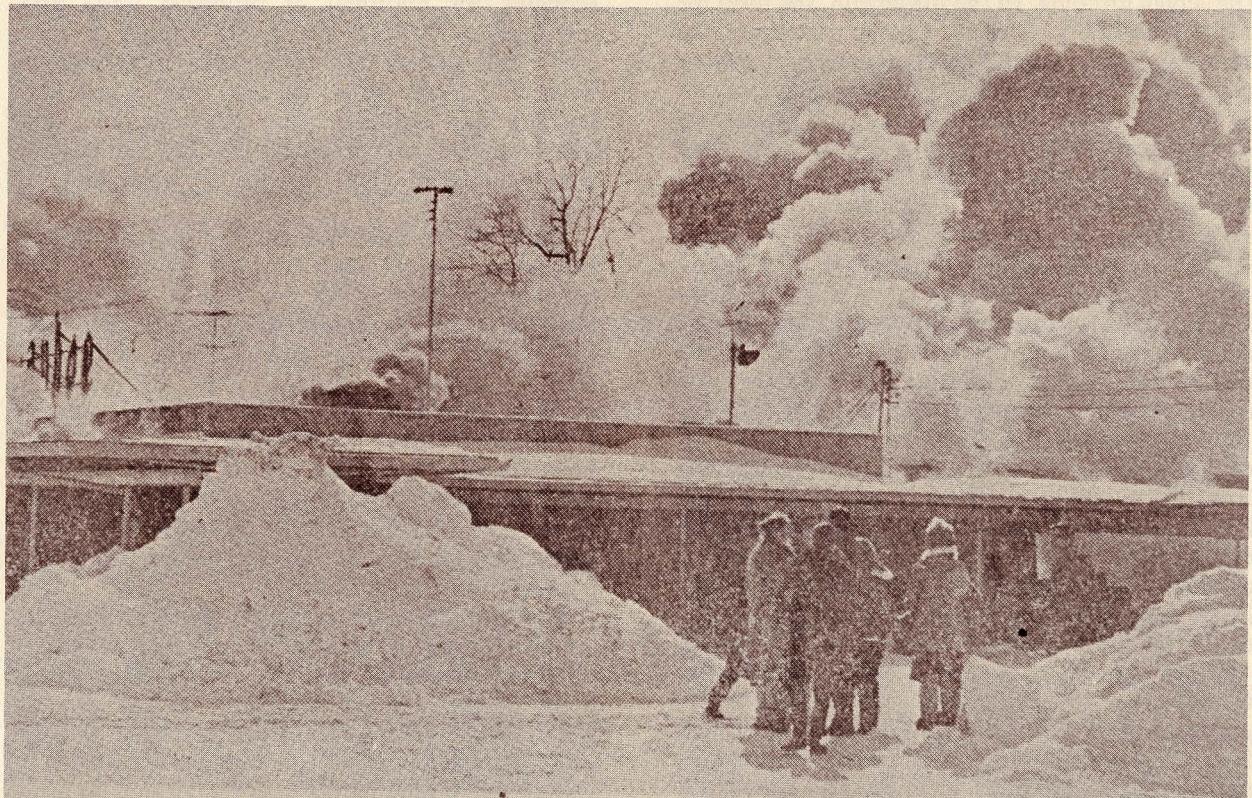


been increased to six members, i.e. supervisor, clerk, treasurer and three trustees.

After a gap from 1942 to 1956 township minutes indicate that the six members of the board were confronted with essentially the same problems, some of which had multiplied. After many years of service to the community, Stuart McCamley was defeated in the Republican primary of 1957 by John Plantefaber, who won the office of supervisor in the April election. The rapid growth of Portage had begun and would gain momentum in the years to follow, effecting great change in Portage life. One of the first things Plantefaber did was to declare that the board would meet regularly on the first and third Monday of each month. Meetings would be held in the fire station until a suitable location could be found for a new township hall by a committee appointed for that purpose. The lease of the Masonic Hall had expired because the township had failed to make rent payments, had let its share of the insurance lapse and had not kept the downstairs in good repair. Licenses for taverns, dance halls and liquor sales continued to be granted and a constant stream of requests for street lighting, paving and traffic signals was presented at board meetings. Roads were a never ending problem and were discussed at almost



*John Plantefaber served as Portage's last township supervisor from 1958 until incorporation.*



**SMOKE BILLOWS UPWARD FROM FLAMING IVANHOE RESTAURANT IN PORTAGE**  
Firemen Battle Blaze in Subfreezing Temperature; Loss Estimated At \$250,000

every meeting. People demanded improvements and wanted paved roads instead of gravel ones that were full of potholes. Some of the local residents felt that the citizens would be willing to pay for road improvements. At one of his last meetings, McCamley remarked that the more improvements were made the heavier traffic would be. At the same time members of the audience demanded more speed signs, curve signs and signal lights.

With all these problems accumulating, Plantefaber appointed three committees, one to study an extension of fire department services, another to study the feasibility of operating a township police department and a third to see if there were a need for a building code. During this same year, 1957, a disaster unit was organized, a new zoning law passed, some roads straightened, a new system of bookkeeping instituted, an addition to the cemetery made and the benefits of Social Security adopted for township officers and employees. Cahill Farms, Incorporated became Southland Village and a portion of the property went to the township for another well site.

By 1958 with more and more people moving to Portage, traffic was a constant concern and street lighting and paving were in ever increasing demand. The superintendent of schools asked for a patrol service for the schools and also for marked crossings to be painted on the streets near the school grounds. In the meantime, the need for a township office remained under discussion. On May 27, 1958 a special election was held seeking citizen approval to build a new township hall and to acquire land for a township park. The vote was in favor of both projects. Bids for the new building were opened in December, after the Gemrich property on U.S. 131 South had been acquired for that purpose.

In January of 1959 more members were added to the traffic and safety commission. Lester Kinney, who was then chairman of the commission, faced a number of new problems. Some concerned Westnedge Avenue, which had become a four lane highway and was still the route of U.S. 131. Many recommendations were discussed to deal with the increasing traffic flow. Some of the trees very close to the highway were safety hazards and were removed; telephone poles were moved back; *No Parking* signs were erected; crosswalks were painted; speed zones were established; and more traffic signals were installed at dangerous intersections.

Portage continued to grow, requests for township services continued to increase and complaints were often aired at township meetings. Building permits for homes alone in the first five month of 1959 reached \$965,800, and property owners opposing the special assessments for street improvement, water main installation and

sewers were revealed to desire the improvements but dislike the cost. That same month the property where Loy Norrix High School now stands was annexed to Kalamazoo and John Plantefaber expressed his opposition to any other annexation of Portage Township property. Claus Schuring, one of the township trustees, said that he thought the township should incorporate but no one else on the board seemed in favor of the idea. At later meetings Schuring again voiced the same opinion but other members were not sympathetic. By June of 1959 home building permits climbed to \$1,032,800 exclusive of a permit issued for a new restaurant. Bids were opened for the new North Fire Station and an open house and dedication ceremony were held for the new township office which was complete with new furniture and office equipment. There were several rezoning requests from commercial firms wishing to build on Westnedge Avenue.

During the rest of 1959 and the following three years the various township commissions were kept busy serving the growing community. So many well fields were in operation the need was felt for a full time employee for the Water Department. Robert Frenthway, then the assistant fire chief, was hired. During the same period a consultant was hired to supply technical data to the planning board. At practically every meeting John Waroe, township engineer, reported new requests for approval of proposed plats and indicated the status of requests already in process. Throughout this time more water mains were laid; more traffic signals, stop signs and flashers were installed; more telephone poles and lines were put up; more street lighting and paving were completed; and sidewalks were laid in several areas.

There was so much business to discuss during this period that the township board often met four times a month instead of two. Special committees were appointed to study specific problems and experts were sometimes hired to make surveys or assist in setting up a building code or in planning a zoning ordinance. State help was hired to make a survey of roads and traffic conditions. The board decided to hold a special election seeking voter approval of one mill for road improvement. Other problems were being analyzed with optimism for solutions in the near future. Then the blow fell that made history.

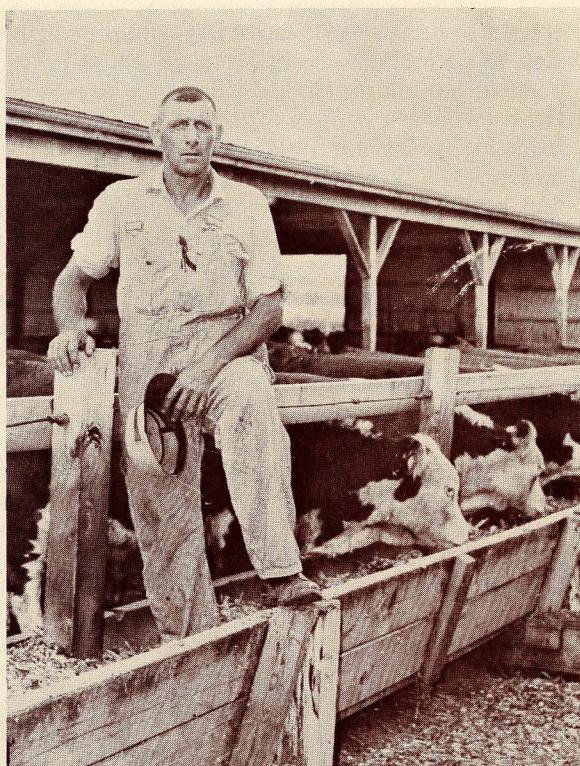
One morning in February of 1962 word came to John Plantefaber that a group of Kalamazoo citizens was seeking to annex the manufacturing plant of the Upjohn Company to the city of Kalamazoo. Whereas the Portage board usually acted with deliberation, this was one time when it sprang into action. A petition was drawn up for a vote on the incorporation of Portage as a city. While the petition was being prepared, citizens

were being drafted to circulate copies of it as soon as they were ready and secure signatures. In less than two hours 400 signatures were obtained and shortly after 12:30 P.M. the petitions were filed in the County Clerk's office.

A counter petition was soon filed by several Kalamazoo citizens and five Portage citizens seeking to bar an election to incorporate as a city. In September of 1962 the counter petition was denied by the county board of supervisors by a vote of twenty to eleven. This action was challenged in circuit court which upheld the board's decision in November of 1962. However, when Wilma Smith, township clerk, called for the special election, an injunction was filed challenging her authority to call the election. The injunction was overruled and the special election was held on February 18, 1963. An all time record number of voters turned out for the election in which 3,762 voted in favor of incorporation and 2,315 voted against it. The measure failed to pass in only Precinct One of the ten Portage precincts and 4,523 registered voters failed to cast ballots.

In the township primary held the same day, John Plantefaber again won the Republican candidacy for township supervisor and polled the largest number of votes of all candidates for the charter commission. The nine member commission. The nine member commission went to work immediately and the charter which they drafted in many long work sessions was approved by the voters in a special election on December 16, 1963, at which time they also selected their first city council. Bernard Mein, grandson of Ben Kanne-gieter, who was one of the earliest Portage celery growers, became the first mayor of the city of Portage. It is interesting to note that Portage is unusual in having developed from township government to cityhood without ever having incorporated as a village.

In spite of all the lawsuits and counter lawsuits, the township board faced the usual problems during the last months of its existence. When cityhood became effective on December 31, 1963 and the new city council began to meet each Tuesday there were many old problems unresolved. In addition, the change to city status created a need for new regulations and ordinances. The city assumed responsibility for the upkeep and repair of its own streets with the exception of a few main roads still under the jurisdiction of the county road commissioners. Paul Flynn was selected as the first city manager. Professional planning consultants from Vilican-Le-man & Associates, Incorporated of Southfield, Michigan developed a proposed land use plan to guide city officials. All property was reappraised by another professional firm. The water system was greatly expanded. The former township budget of one half million dollars was totally inad-



*John Schuring, farmer, was active in local affairs before and after incorporation.*

**THE PORTAGE HERALD**  
IV CHARTER SUPPLEMENT PORTAGE, MICHIGAN NOVEMBER 21, 1963

## Proposed New Charter FOR CITY OF Portage, Michigan

(This 16-page section is a supplement to and part of  
the issue of The Portage Herald for November 21, 1963)

### Portage Charter Commission



James A. Davenport  
Vice-Chairman



Ray Derkken, Jr.



Richard James



Anthony H. Lemmer  
Secretary



William H. Morris



John Plantefaber



Wayne Sackett



Robert Thomson  
Chairman



Arthur Webb

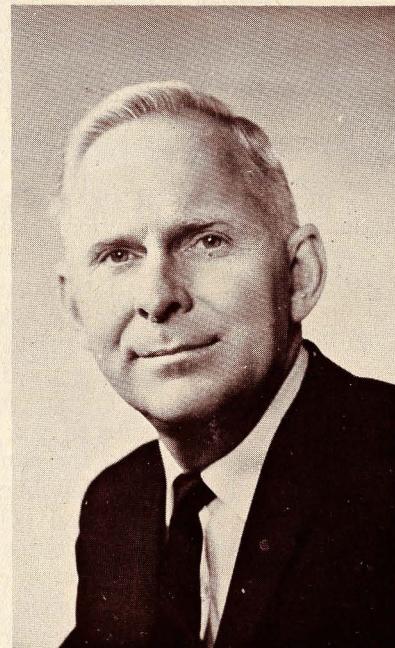
(All Charter Pictures by Bennett Studio)

equate to fund all of these additional city activities, and a rapidly growing budget resulted.

An important development for the new city was the establishment of the Portage Police Department in September, 1964, with Richard Wild as its first chief. Prior to that time, police protection had been provided to the residents of Portage Township by the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's Department. And, even after incorporation, a special Sheriff's Patrol of four men and two cruisers continued to provide police protection until the city was able to organize and equip its own force. The fledgling unit was first housed in one corner of City Hall and its reports were sent to the Sheriff's Department. After moving to a frame house in 1956, the department began handling its own records and operating its own communications system. Now housed in the new police and court building where a lockup is available for the first time, the Portage Police Department has grown from six men and two cruisers to a staff of forty-nine with a dozen cars. New officers receive up-to-date training at a police academy. The modern, well-equipped police force is under the leadership of George VonBehren, who became chief in 1975.

New families continued to come to Portage and demands for more services were increased. The old problems of traffic, street lighting, sewers, pavement, water, fire protection, and plat development and approval continued to come before the council. During the administrations of the first three mayors, Bernard Mein, Anthony Lem-

mer and Robert Duncan, the official business of the city was of a generally routine nature with little change except in one area. Each year the budget showed a decided increase. In many departments more staff members were needed and



*Bernard "Bud" Mein, first mayor of the City of Portage.*

DECEMBER 29, 1963.



**FIRST CITY OFFICERS**—These eight men were elected Dec. 16 to form the first administration of the City of Portage. Clockwise, they are Councilmen Jack Bartley, 29, of 6305 Avon, Michigan Bell Telephone Co. foreman; John J. Schuring, 51, of 4515 E. Centre, farmer; Okko Brouwer, 52, of 4813 Long Lake Drive, chief industrial engineer at Fuller Transmission,

and Anthony Lemmer, 38, of 1604 Osterhout, Bell Telephone lineman; Mayor Bernard Mein, 43, of 7001 S. Westnedge, housing developer; Councilmen Carroll Staffen, 49, of 1330 Osterhout, fuel distributing firm owner, and Clair Branc, 59, of 9320 S. 24th, Upjohn Co. department head, and Municipal Judge Kenneth Fricke, 45, of 5139 Merryview, attorney.



*Old house at the site of the present Police-Court Building was the first home of the Portage Police.*

*Members of the first Portage Police Department, organized in 1965, were (front, from left) Officers Kewley, Strand, White, Coates and (back, from left) Officers Graham, McGee, Southworth and Sharp.*

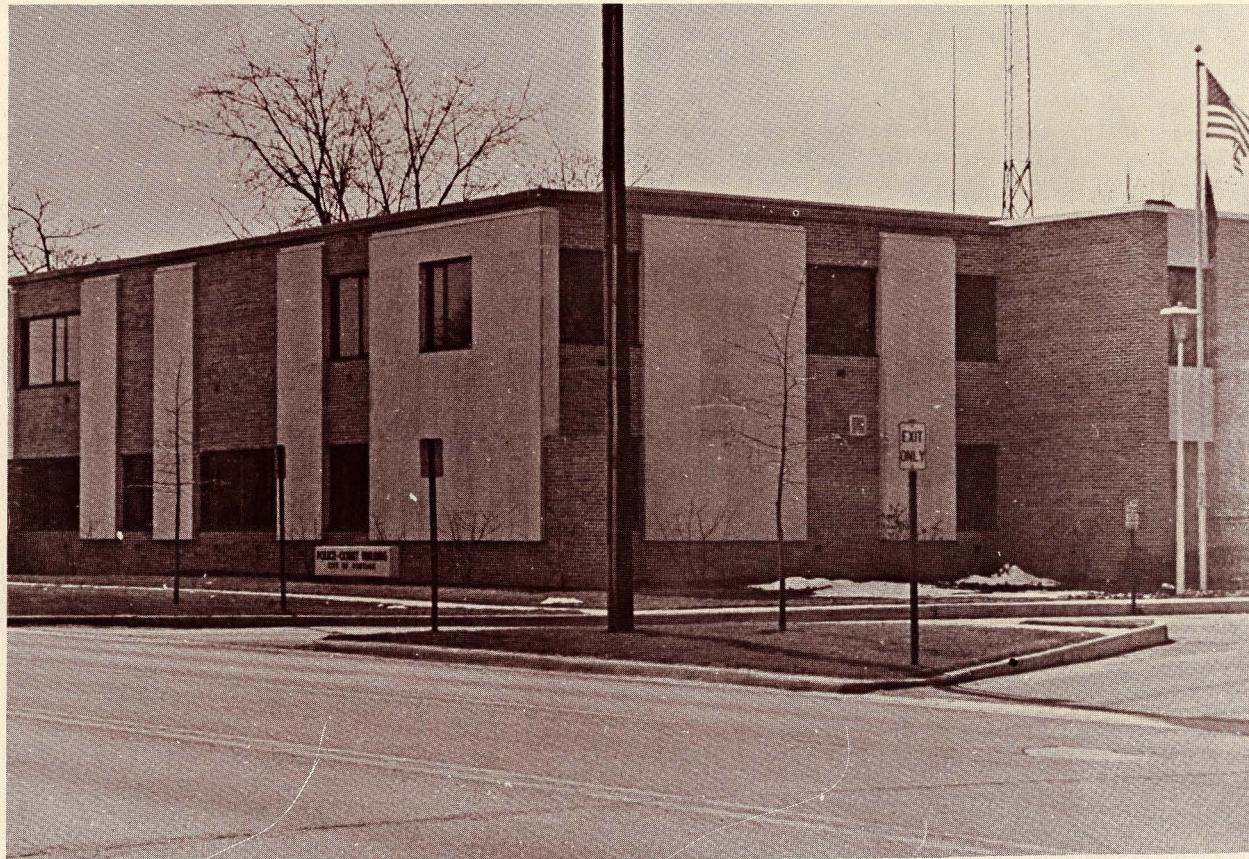


more appointments were made. In the current budget for 1975 expenditures exceed four million dollars including the new library. In the first issue of a newsletter to citizens, the current city manager, Donald P. Ziemke, gave a detailed account of city income and expenditures. According to LuVerne Anderson, city assessor, the state equalized valuation of Portage has increased seven per cent during 1975 to \$270,223,100. This year Anderson completed a brochure showing all city owned property in the thirty-six sections, including well sites, plats, streets, parks, fire stations, land fills and minor properties. The list is impressive and still growing though less rapidly than a few years ago. According to Lois Johnson, city clerk, the number of voting precincts has now reached nineteen which is quite a change from the original eight.

Another change for Portage was the election in November of 1973 of Betty Ongley as the first woman mayor to preside over six other council members who at present are all men. In 1975 the board of education also elected its first woman president, Gayl Werme.

Mayor Ongley made an interesting statement at the council meeting of August 12, 1975 after a letter from a citizen had been read objecting to the slogan on the welcoming signs at the city limits. She suggested that perhaps the slogan characterizing Portage might read "Crossroads of Southwestern Michigan" because both U.S. 131 and I-94 intersect within the city. This statement recalls a time long ago when the two main Indian trails formed the connecting link between the St. Joseph and Kalamazoo Rivers. The pioneers following these trails and settling in Portage were proud of their township and worked hard to improve it. In the years that followed they kept a very close bond with Kalamazoo, many of their descendants settling in the city in later years. Today some of the descendants of Kalamazoo pioneers are coming to Portage. In spite of the bitterness engendered by the events of the early sixties there is still a close relationship between the two cities. Perhaps some day they may be known as twin cities as Minneapolis and St. Paul are known. There will be no Mississippi River dividing them, only Kilgore Road, named after one of the very first Portage pioneers.

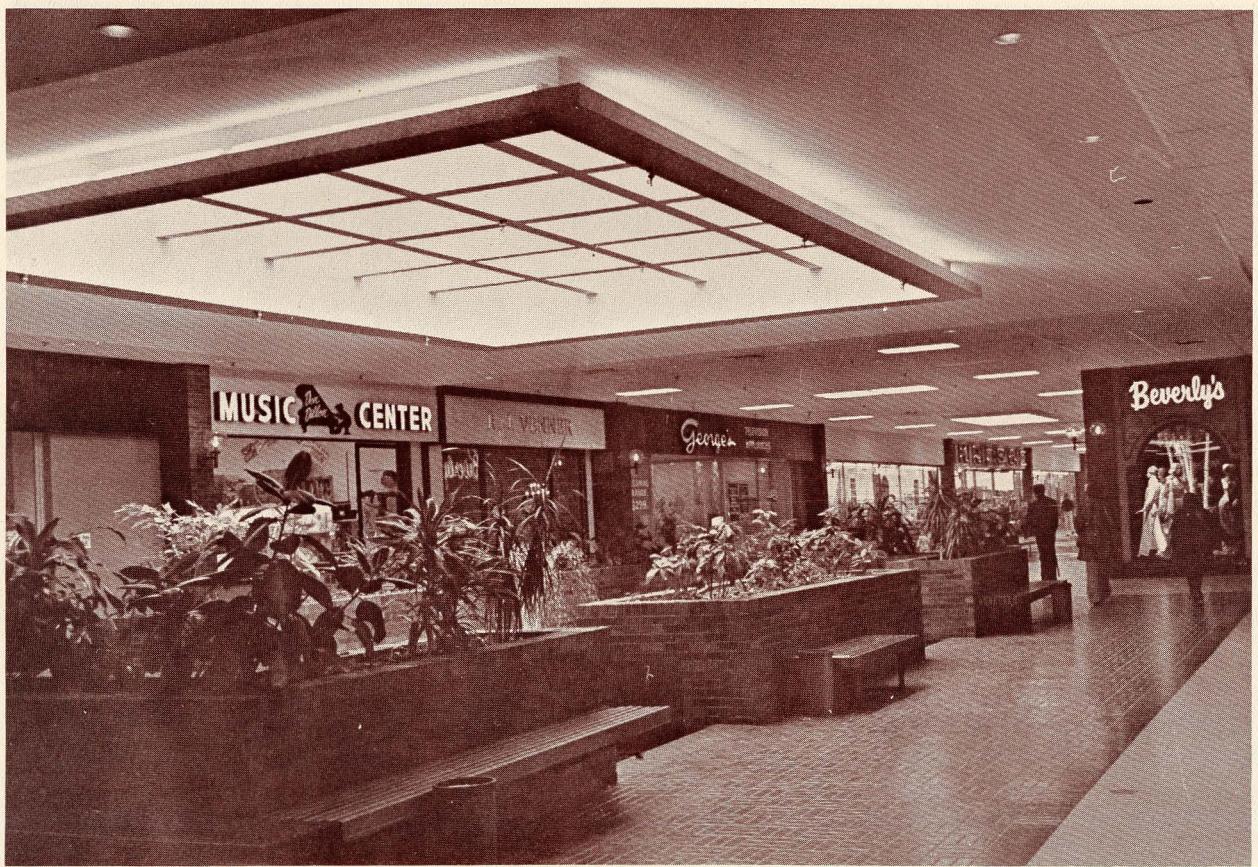
*Police-Court Building completed in 1970.*





*Mayor Betty Lee Ongley receives joint resolution by the Michigan Senate and House of Representatives from Portage resident and State Representative Wayne B. Sackett. The resolution honored the City of Portage on its 10th anniversary, January 1, 1974.*





# 9

---

## Commerce, Industry and the Professions

---

Available historical records indicate that industry in Portage began on the northwest corner of what is now Portage Road and Milham Avenue. Known as McKee's Corners, this location boasted a blacksmith shop, a tavern, a carpenter's shop and one other business difficult to identify. Two of the businesses were owned by the McKee brothers and a third McKee had a sizeable farm on the southwest corner. This same corner was later known as Indian Fields Corners. A tavern and a blacksmith shop were basic essentials for any new settlement. The tavern keeper sheltered and supplied food for the traveler and from all accounts the old Portage Road trail was well used. There were two taverns on this trail, the other at Austin Lake. A blacksmith was an extremely welcome addition to any group of pioneers. Not only did he shoe the horses and oxen, but he sharpened the plows and the axes that were so important in the early years.

Shoeing an ox was much more difficult and time consuming than shoeing a horse. A shoe had to be made in two sections to fit the cloven hooves of the ox. The iron was somewhat thinner than for a horseshoe and the nails smaller so more nails were used. Because the ox was a huge beast, shoeing was no easy task for the blacksmith. Consequently, he charged considerably more for this job. When there were no shoeing jobs to be done the smith was kept busy making all the iron equipment needed in the log or frame houses and barns built in the 1830's and 1840's. Making fireplace cranes to hold the heavy iron pots, door latches to keep the doors firmly closed, screens and hinges for doors and barns, sledges for pounding, shovels, hoes, link chains, different types of knives and countless other tools for farmers, housewives, and carpenters, were all jobs for the blacksmith.

With harnesses, wagons and buggies, there seemed to be almost no end to the parts that could need repair. At times the blacksmith had to put new spokes into a wheel or fix the springs on the wagon box. Some of the more expensive jobs were fixing runners on sleigh or bobsled, repairing and fitting ox yokes, mending irons on a bridge and putting iron hoops around wagon wheels. For these services he received from two to four dollars. Items for which the blacksmith received less than twenty cents were mending a bucket, a hoe, a toast iron, a strap on a sled, a hinge, a brace on a wagon, a saddle, or a shovel. For four cents each, he mended a skein on a wagon or repaired a hoop. Besides all the shoeing and mending, he made numerous items to be used by carpenters. A blacksmith's account book kept in 1842 contained accounts for two carpenters with almost daily entries.

It is small wonder then that only a few years elapsed before another blacksmith along with two or three carpenters located their shops on the corner where the Southland Mall now stands. The blacksmith's name was Carpenter and the intersection of Westnedge and Milham Avenues was for years known as Carpenters Corners. Although the population had not increased greatly the pioneers who had settled were very busy at the time building homes and barns and, therefore, work for carpenters was plentiful. Some carpenters built only barns while others built both barns and houses. Harvey Booth, an early settler, built many Portage barns. John Gibbs, also an early settler, built the first barn in Portage. In a census of the late 1850's it is recorded that nine carpenters were living in Portage Township.

Eliza Root's sawmill, established in 1834, no doubt had a great deal to do with the large

amount of building going on in the township. A few of the old homes still standing in the northwest quarter of the city seem to have been built before 1850. In 1859, Stephen Howard built the first brick house in Portage on Milham Road, then known as Texas Road. It was one of the outstanding homes of the period and much planning and detail work went into its construction. All of the bricks are handmade and because there was no brickyard in the township, it is probable that a brick maker was imported expressly for this house. After the 1850's jobs for carpenters began to increase in other portions of the township. There are many homes still standing from the post Civil War period, some quite elaborate and others more modest.

Some farmers made the journey to Grand Rapids for wagon loads of plaster for their homes. Others bought their plaster from one of the many plaster haulers. Sometimes from fifteen to twenty wagon loads of plaster were seen on the Grand Rapids road in one trip. After the Kalamazoo to Grand Rapids plank road was completed in 1853, many loads of plaster found their way to Portage via that route.

A nursery established by Timothy Dunham in

1836 must have been popular with settlers. Here they could select an assortment of fruit trees and berry bushes. Although most farmers grew fruit for their own use, there is little evidence that orchards were a big business. There was one sizeable orchard between Centre Avenue and West Lake and today one fairly large orchard remains near Texas Township on the northwest side of the city. One small vineyard is still producing grapes west of Angling Road and several blueberry farms on the north side of Vanderbilt Avenue are run by the Kovach family. The soil which produced healthy corn, wheat and oats may not have been quite as good for growing fruit. Whatever the reason, grain was grown extensively and soon after the railroad began service in Portage, a grain elevator was built near the railroad station. It had several owners during the years, including the Marshan family and Porter Matteson, who sold out to the Mein family. The Meins perhaps ran the elevator longer than any other family. Many of the farmers living on the north side of the township took their grain into Kalamazoo.

Some of the smaller land owners entered into business enterprises in addition to farming. There

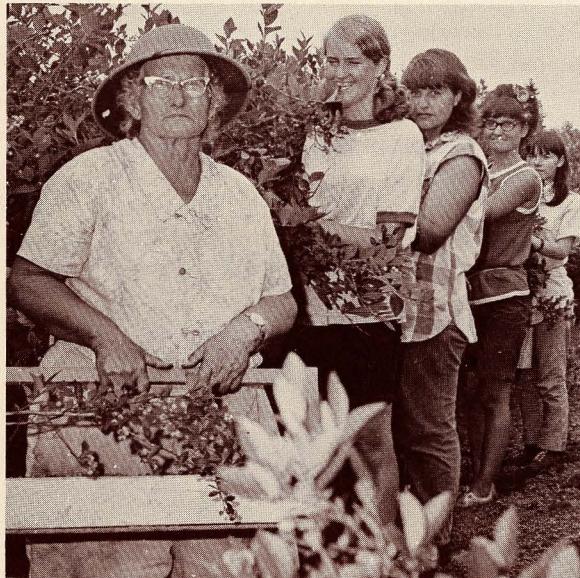
*Packing grapes at Portage Center vineyard around the turn of the century.*



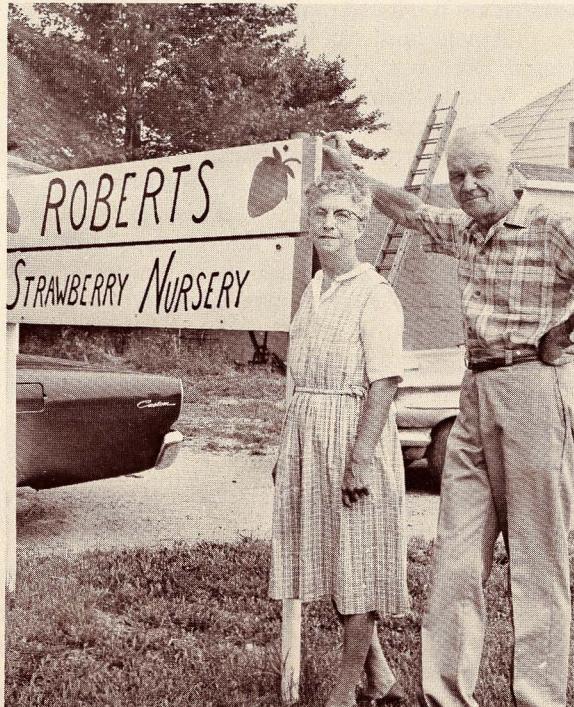
were sheep shearers, threshers, ice cutters and some settlers had large wood lots from which they cut and sold wood to schools, private families, the Grange and the Masonic Lodge. The wool from sheep was all taken to Kalamazoo, no doubt much of it going to William Cobb, a former sheep farmer

living on Portage Road in an elaborate home which is now the Beacon Club. Cobb kept his farm in Portage for several years after he went into the wool business.

While these varied business enterprises were in



*Picking blueberries on the Kovach farm on Vanderbilt Road.*



*Processing Kovach blueberries.*

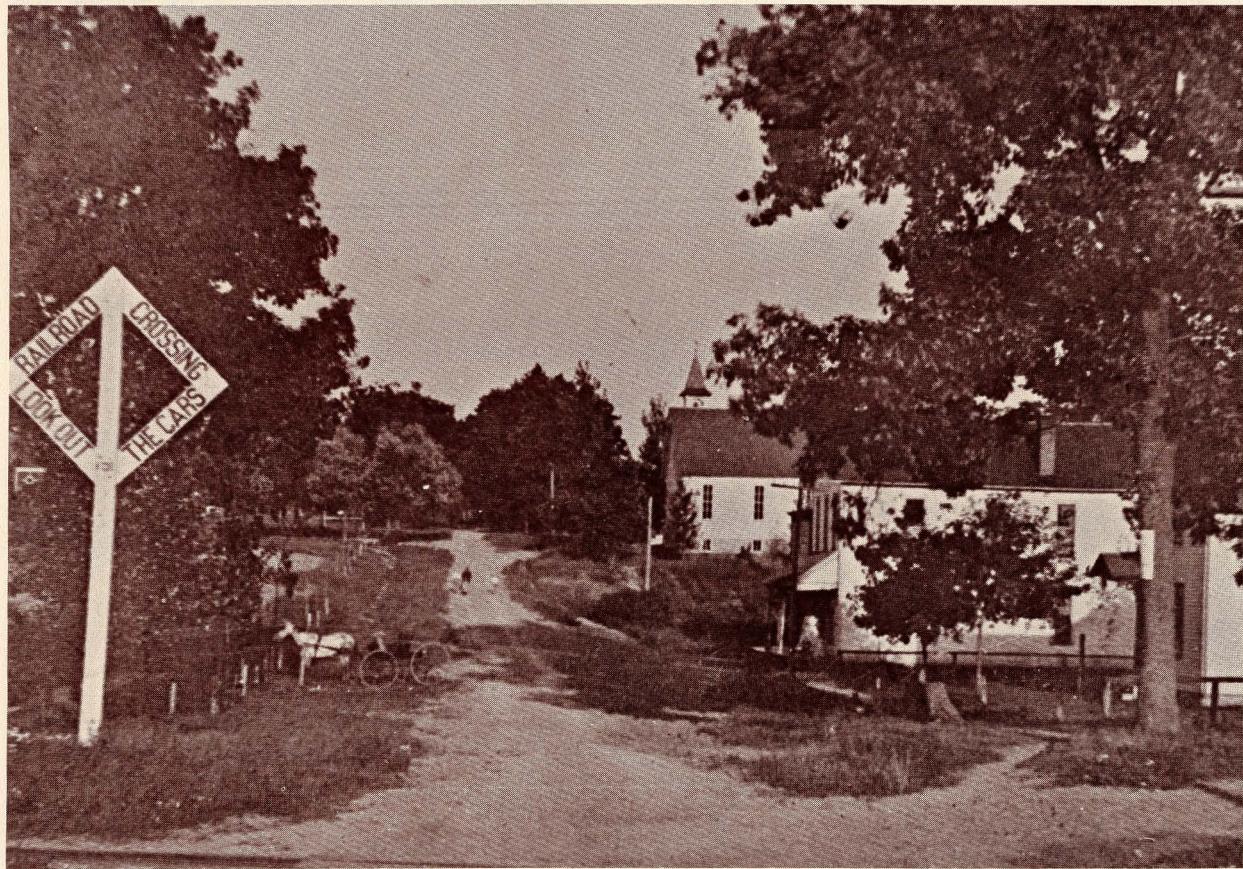
operation and carpenters were kept busy building houses, barns, woodsheds, well houses and other farm buildings, another group of settlers known as land agents was dealing in what is now called real estate. There were certain areas in Portage which changed hands with almost regular frequency. Many of the owners were well known Kalamazoo business men. According to some of the old maps and tax records, these men often bought from one fourth to a whole section at a time. Within two to four years the land was divided into smaller parcels and sold to individual owners. Two areas which changed hands almost constantly were several acres on either side of Westnedge Avenue, north of Milham Avenue and an area around Westnedge and Centre Avenues. Other properties were held from ten to fifteen years and then the owner would move to another piece of land. Some settlers owned two or three parcels of land in various sections. As has been noted before, this constant shifting about seemed to be most prevalent throughout the center of the township.

Several farms included some swampland which was useful only for grazing cattle on the driest

areas during the summer months. These swamps were thought to have little value until about the turn of the century when a group of Dutch immigrants began arriving from Kalamazoo. Many of them had seen the extensive celery farming of the Dutch who had settled in Kalamazoo. Anxious to begin on their own land but not always able to afford the price of drained marshland, they cast their eyes on the Portage marshes. With the coming of the celery farmers, business became very brisk all along Westnedge Avenue south of Milham Avenue and on both east and west Centre Avenue. Carpenters were kept more than busy building homes, celery sheds, small barns and greenhouses. Since every celery farmer owned at least one horse, the blacksmiths had plenty of work. Two general stores, a wagon shop, and a barber shop were opened at Portage Center and business was brisk.

The general store and the independent grocery have historically played an important role in the life of any growing community. Although there is no complete list available, the names of Southwell, Dykstra, Adams, Spencer, Pike, Gage and Wolbers are among the best remembered by

*"Main Street" - Portage Center, ca. 1900. Pictured is Centre Avenue, looking east. On right is the Southwell home, Southwell's Portage Grocery Co. and Post Office, and Methodist Church. Horse and wagon are tied in front of Pike & Gage General Merchandise.*

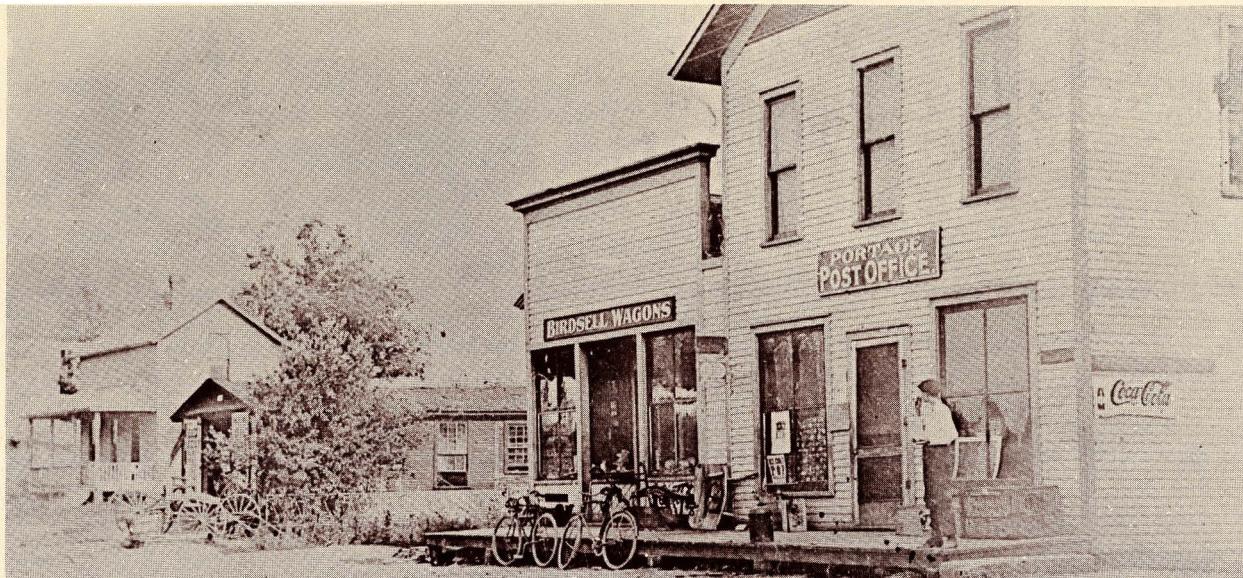




*Southwell's store, ca. 1907. At one time there was a pool hall upstairs.*

*Postmaster F. I. Southwell in doorway.*





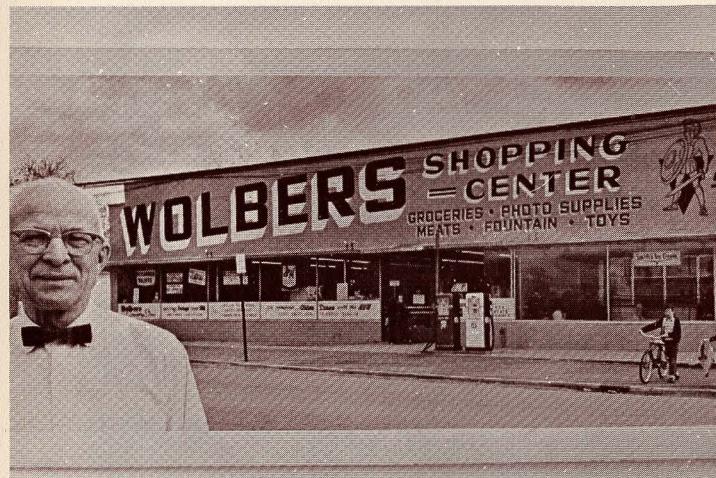
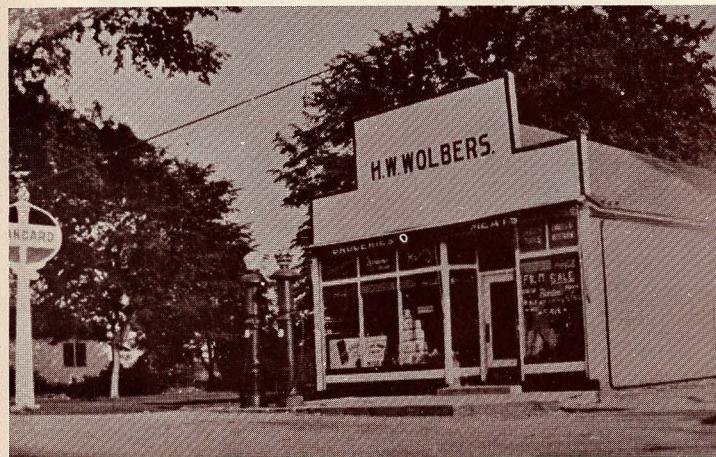
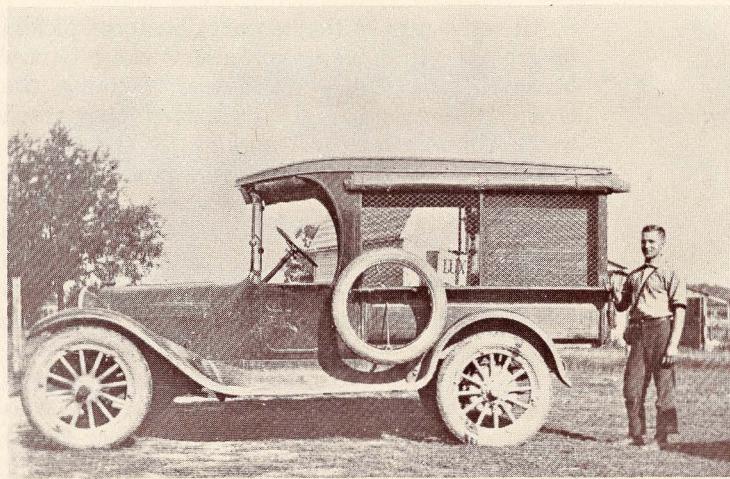
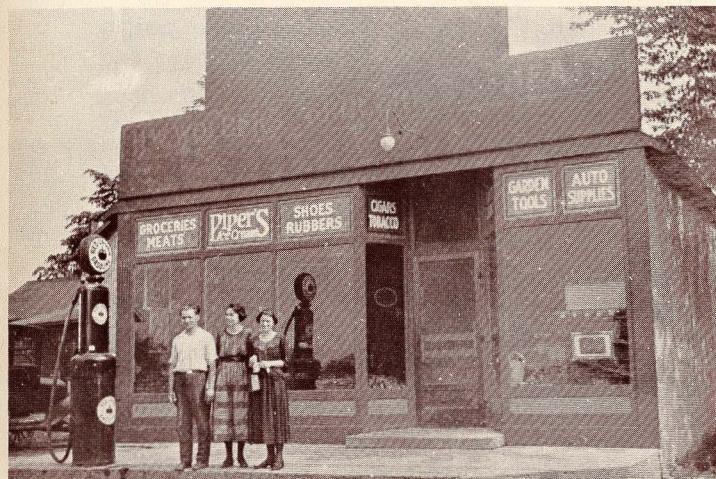
*Looking east on Centre Ave. sometime before 1916 when Southwell's store burned. Smeenge's Blacksmith Shop and the Methodist Church are in the background.*



*Schuring's Garage, ca. 1917, on the site of the old Portage Grocery Co., now Precision Engineering, Inc. (Looking west on Centre.)*



*Pike and Gage General Merchandise, now Dell's TV Service. (Looking west on Centre.)*



Portage citizens as family operated stores. When the Wolbers Shopping Center closed in June, 1967, it was the oldest business in Portage. Opened in 1916 as a general store selling such items as crackers from a barrel, bulk flour and button shoes, the store was operated by Etta and Henry Wolbers at the southeast corner of West-nedge and Centre Avenues. At one time, a store

nearby was owned and operated by Ebenezer Pike's son, Elmer. During the height of celery farming in Portage, Wolbers carried accounts from crop to crop with no interest charges, a service of the past but one necessary for the financial survival of the farmers and a refreshing reminder of the willingness to help one another that existed among earlier settlers.

After the turn of the century, business picked up around the railroad station at Portage Center because in the early years of celery farming, the crop was shipped to Chicago in cars refrigerated by ice cut from the various lakes in the winter. For this reason, the number of ice houses and ice cutters around the lakes increased. When ice boxes began to be used in individual homes, ice was either delivered or picked up by the farmers who owned these conveniences. Commercial fishing developed at Long Lake and some of the fishermen made their homes around the lake. Besides fishing and ice cutting, there were a number of property owners around the lakes who operated resorts. Ramona Park, Summer Home and Buckholtz Resorts were located at Long Lake. There were several smaller resorts at West Lake, including Ames, Newell and Matteson. For several years a spur of the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad went to Ramona Park and it was a favorite place for outings. There was also a large dance hall there which was a popular place for

Kalamazoo, Vicksburg and Portage young people to congregate. For almost two decades they came by train or horse and buggy.

When the automobile became more common the railroad spur was abandoned but the various resorts remained popular places and proved to be good business ventures for the owners. As roads



1975 view of Centre Avenue looking east from Shaver Road. At left, Dell's TV is the site of the old Pike and Gage store and later the Portage Tavern. The building at right was Schuring's Garage, built on the site of the Portage Grocery Co.

John Smit, former partner of Smith and DeBree hardware store, was honored on his 78th birthday in 1961.



improved and the number of cars continued to increase, some owners of lake property began to build small cottages and rent them to vacationing families in the summer. Others sold lots surrounding the lakes to owners who built their own cottages. Later developers bought acreage, platted it, and built access roads to the individual sites. Once again carpenters were busy building numerous small vacation cottages for many people in Kalamazoo and surroundings. About this time the Brunson Cement Company was doing business near Sugar Loaf Lake, and the Kalamazoo Tile Company was located on Shaver Road. Both firms, no doubt, furnished materials for much local construction.

As the population of Portage continued to increase and residents bought more and more cars, many new businesses opened. Filling stations and garages replaced the blacksmiths. More schools were built. More stores and eating places began to open and some industries were established on Shaver Road. After World War II, the areas on either side of Westnedge and south of Kilgore Road began to change. The original farms had been divided into smaller holdings, but at this time real estate developers moved in. In a very short time, plat after plat was developed and many fine homes were built during the 1950's and later. The growth of these areas was soon followed by a boom in construction of permanent homes in the lakes areas. The residents of many of these homes worked in Kalamazoo but preferred to live in a suburban area or enjoyed living near a lake.

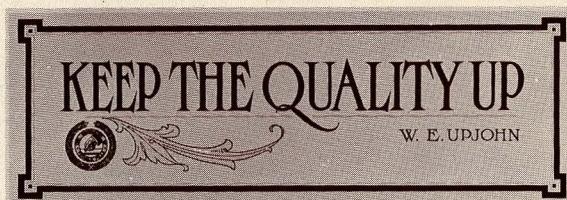
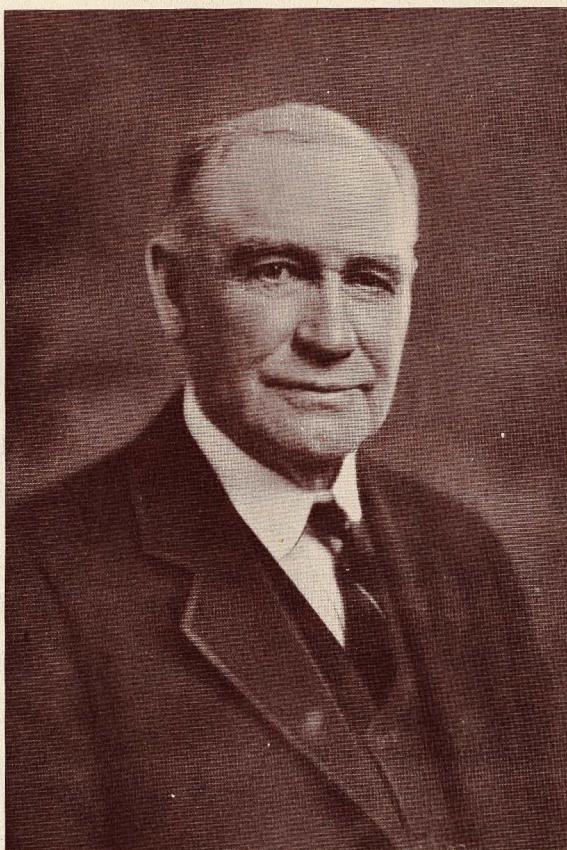
If a single event were chosen for the extent of its economic impact on the general prosperity and astonishing development of Portage since World War II, it could be summed up in one word: Upjohn. Although the Upjohn Company was founded in Kalamazoo in 1886 by Dr. William E. Upjohn and his brother, Dr. Henry U. Upjohn, the tremendous importance of the company to Portage did not develop until the 1940's. During 1945 the company gradually, and rather secretly, acquired over 1500 acres of farm land in the eastern portion of Portage Township in preparation for building a large manufacturing complex on Portage Road. The company had erected a modern building in Kalamazoo in 1936 but by 1946 the number of employees had more than doubled to nearly 2000 and expansion became necessary.

The decision to locate in Portage rather than expanding the downtown Kalamazoo facilities was made for a number of reasons. Most importantly, there was ample land available in Portage to allow for adequate parking, generous recreational facilities and almost unlimited future expansion. The farm land was considerably less expensive than prime Kalamazoo property and the tax structure in Portage at the time was more



*Original Upjohn factory built in Kalamazoo in 1886.*

*Founder, Dr. W. E. Upjohn, and his motto.*



favorable. Whatever the reasons, the opening in 1948 of two smaller plants for production of



An early Upjohn Company pill die.

antibiotics and adrenal cortex drugs and the completion in 1951 of the thirty-three acre pharmaceutical production plant insured that an already growing community would experience a phenomenal boom in its population, its economy and in almost every other area of its development. These and other smaller buildings were joined in 1961 by the large and architecturally distinctive general office building containing approximately seven acres and located on the west side of Portage Road across from the plant. The enormous tax revenues from the Upjohn property have been the most important single influence in the growth of the Portage school system which is the envy of many communities. Today the Upjohn Company represents thirty-two per cent of the Portage tax base.

One interesting bit of Upjohn history concern the effect of the move to Portage on employees, most of whom at the time lived in Kalamazoo and were understandably concerned about transportation to and from the new and remote location. To assist its employees, the company purchased and began operating a fleet of buses which reached fifteen in number at the height of its unique

Upjohn Company general office building and manufacturing plant on Portage Road.



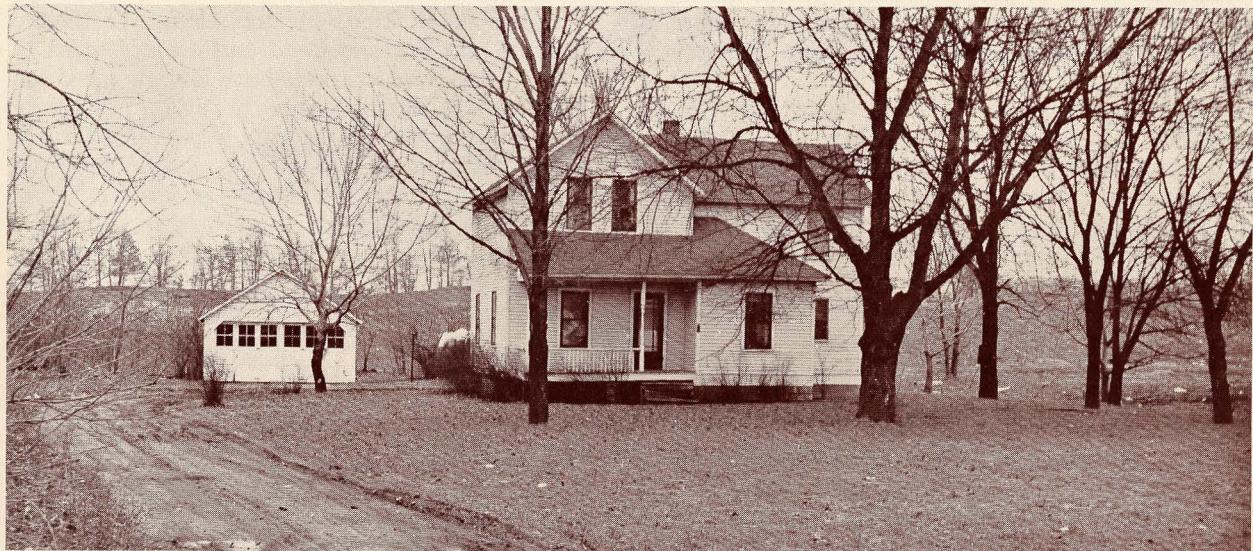
twenty-one year operation. The service was discontinued in 1970.

Many of Upjohn's early products became almost household words, e.g., Phenolax, Cheracol, and Kaopectate. Today, these familiar products have been joined by a host of modern pharmaceuticals which have made Upjohn one of the largest ethical drug manufacturers in the world. In addition, the company has expanded into extensive manufacture of chemical and agricultural products on an international scale as well as acquiring other diversified operations. Upjohn is active in other parts of Kalamazoo County besides Portage. In downtown Kalamazoo, a large sci-

tific staff conducts pharmaceutical research to improve existing products and develop new ones. In Richland Township, the Agricultural Division operates from its headquarters on extensive farm-lands.

In 1975, total corporate sales exceeded \$890 million; research expenditures reached a new high of almost \$79 million; net earnings topped \$66 million; and the number of employees worldwide passed 17,500. At the beginning of 1976, Upjohn employed about 4200 people in the Portage complex and an additional 1500 in other Kalamazoo facilities. Although records do not indicate the number of employees who live in Portage, it

*Farm which is now the site of Meijer Thrifty Acres.*





*Southland Mall is the largest shopping center in Portage.*

may be assumed that the company provides employment for an impressive number of Portage residents. Its 1975 property tax payment on its Portage holdings of over \$4.5 million was more than seventeen times the second place industry (see Appendix).

The completion of Interstate 94 through the northern part of Portage Township in 1959 further stimulated growth of the community. It promoted industrial and commercial development by improving access for transportation of raw materials, finished products and all kinds of business supplies. Once again real estate boomed; motels instead of taverns were built along Westnedge Avenue; new plats and roads came into being almost overnight; and new schools continued to be needed.

The 1975 Business Directory for the city lists thirty-three industries presently operating in modern Portage. They are located in several industrial zones, with the largest number on Shaver Road and other concentrations on Vanderbilt Road, East Kilgore Road, Lovers Lane, Sprinkle Road, Portage Road and East Milham Avenue. The Upjohn Company, the Shakespeare Company, Burdix, Mol Bee, Inc., Roto Finish, W.-L Molding, Ronningen-Petter Company, Bunting Brass, and Kalamazoo Spring Corporation all appear in the list of the top twenty-five Portage taxpayers (see Appendix). It is interesting to note that the three industries located on Lovers Lane stand very near the site of the old Elijah Root sawmill, one of the earliest business ventures in Portage.

Reflecting still expanding residential and business areas of the city, the number of enterprises dealing in building supplies is thirty and there are more than twenty builders and contractors. There is no doubt that the number of service stations (about forty) and other auto-related businesses (almost twenty) far exceeds the number of blacksmiths of an earlier day. The number of service stations is more than equaled by the number of restaurants, and it is doubtful that there is a street in Kalamazoo County that displays more

eating places than Westnedge Avenue with over twenty. Four of the six motels in Portage are also found on Westnedge.

Stores of all kinds abound along Westnedge Avenue and Portage Road and are scattered in other areas. Supermarkets have long replaced the general store, although there are still a few family operated markets and take out stores. The largest shopping center in Portage is unquestionably the Southland Mall, which houses numerous small and medium sized shops as well as two supermarkets and a large branch of Gilmore's department store.

There is a wide variety of business enterprises and professional services existing in today's Portage, including thirty beauty and barber shops, over one hundred clothing, sporting good, home furnishings and related stores, five financial institutions at nine locations, seven insurance agencies, six accounting firms, five advertising and five engineering firms, two funeral homes, and fifteen real estate agencies. Indeed the real estate agents are still busy, as in earlier days, buying and selling the remaining land in Portage, which is geographically one of the largest incorporated cities in Michigan.

There is no record of a physician practicing in Portage until the days of Dr. A. E. Henwood, who provided medical care for at least some Portagers from about the 1920's in his Milham Avenue home, built by pioneer Stephen Howard and presently owned by the Van Riper family. Other citizens no doubt went to Kalamazoo when they needed medical attention and a sizeable number went to doctors in Vicksburg. Today there are fifteen dentists, four optometrists, two chiropractic physicians, two osteopathic physicians, one podiatrist and nine medical physicians. Six of the medical doctors practice at the Portage Medical Clinic on E. Centre Avenue. The clinic was established by Dr. R. Keith Currier in 1950 in a building on Portage Road across from the Upjohn Company. Dr. Currier selected that location in anticipation of the development of a company town on the land surrounding the new

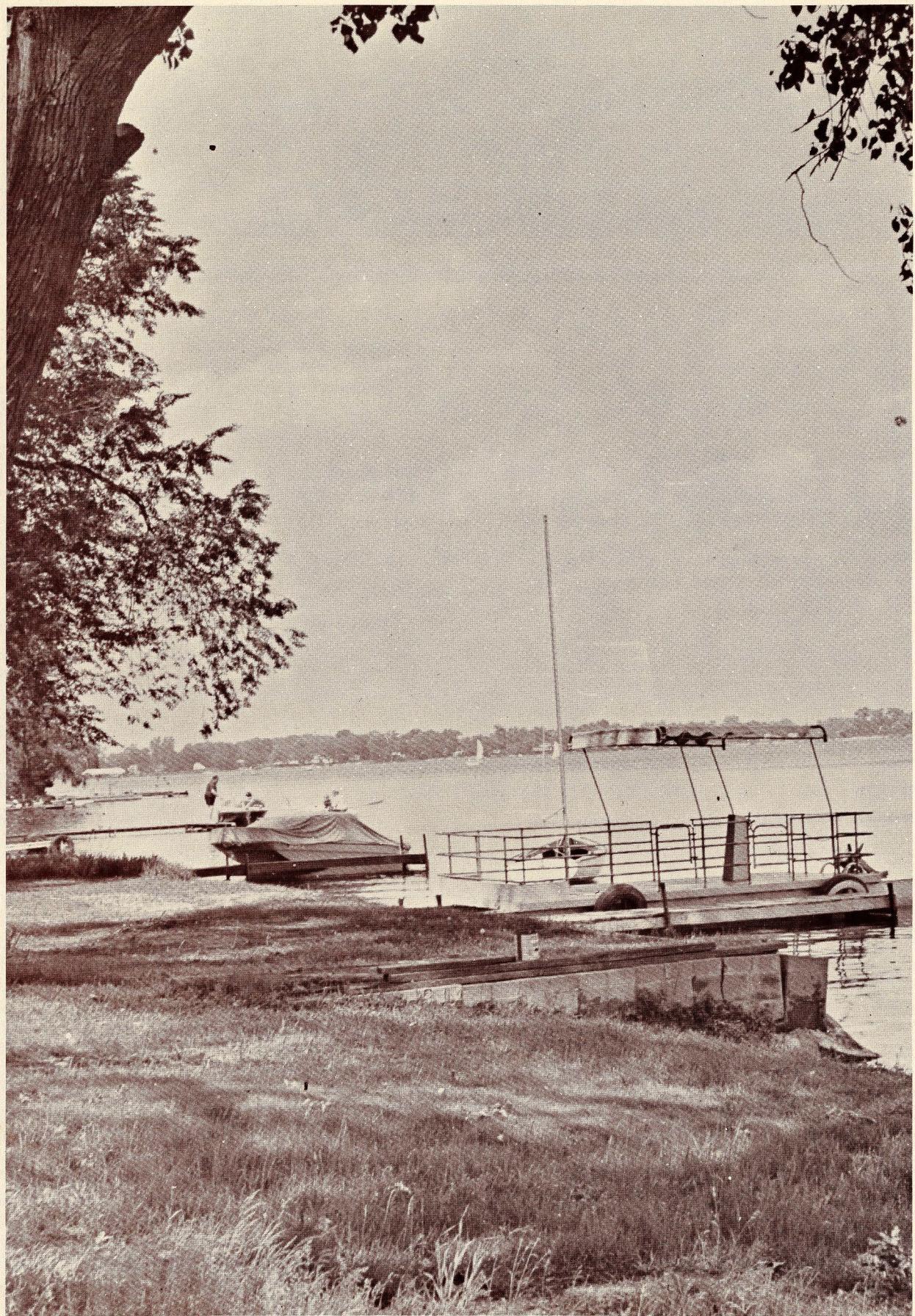
manufacturing complex. Although plans for an Upjohn residential community were discarded, the growth of Portage supported a thriving medical practice and necessitated gradually increasing the staff to its present level.

Historically, animals have always played an important role in Portage life. Today there are four animal hospitals, an unusual number for a

city of some 38,000. No doubt the veterinarians cater to dogs and cats, other pets and a growing number of riding horses. No longer are they concerned with the ox, the plow horse and the milk cow. Such beasts, once so important to the agricultural community, have almost all disappeared from the fast-growing city.

*Traffic congestion comes to Portage—the "Neon Jungle" on S. Westnedge Ave.*





# 10

---

---

## Transportation and Recreation

---

---

The history of Portage began with the Indians when they discovered that the best route between the St. Joseph and Kalamazoo Rivers led directly through the forested and swampy area which is now the city of Portage. Instead of one major trail, there were three and several minor paths that may have been hunting paths through the trees. What is now Angling Road was named by the first surveyors when they encountered the curvy and twisting path. Many of the paths followed the curves of Portage Creek or crossed it at different intersections. Milham Avenue, following along Dry Prairie, seems to have been the straightest path of all. At one time it had three names: the western part was called Texas Road; the center section was Carpenters Corners Road; and the eastern third was Milham Road. The main trail seems to have been what is now Portage Road, going between the lakes and then twisting and turning over higher ground. Not only did it lead to the Kalamazoo River, but it led directly to Indian Fields, one of the largest Indian villages in this part of Michigan.

At this point in time it would be difficult to estimate how many years the Potawatomies trod with moccasined feet over the well worn trails and paths. Perhaps the earlier mound builders had used the same routes centuries before them. Evidence that these ancient peoples once inhabited the territory was found near Indian Fields when the pioneers arrived but all the mounds have long since disappeared. Today airplanes glide over the hard topped area where Indians once put up their wigwams and grew corn, pumpkins and squash. No remnant of their culture remains, but here and there an old hickory or walnut tree is still standing, its nuts dropping to the ground in the fall. The squirrels that gather these nuts may be

the descendants of the squirrels that helped to provide meat for Indians and pioneers long ago.

When the pioneers arrived, one of their first priorities for transportation was to widen the existing trails. A covered wagon had difficulty passing between the trees and bushes lining the trails. This was true especially of the lesser trails or paths that led through the forest. Some old journals state that it was sometimes easier to drive the oxen through the oak openings than along the trail. There are still some oak openings remaining in Portage today. As a rule they are found on fairly level ground and have considerable space between the trees.

When Portage became a township the first pathfinders were appointed. Their name described them accurately for they were to choose the most suitable paths to be made into roads leading past the farms of the pioneers. In the first group of pathfinders there were only seven men, all living north of what is now Milham Avenue with the exception of Moses Austin. No doubt Austin had the job of finding suitable roads in the southern part of the township. Pathfinders worked closely with the three elected road commissioners. In addition to finding paths they were responsible for widening the paths, cutting down trees and digging out bushes. They were either paid a pittance for their work or excused from paying taxes. In 1841 there were eleven pathfinders, by then called pathmasters, and four lived in the southern part of the township, giving evidence of the southerly growth of Portage. By the following year the pathmasters were called overseers of highways which by today's standards for roadways seems an overstatement. Even such an exalted title did not deter the early pioneers from complaining to their public officials about the

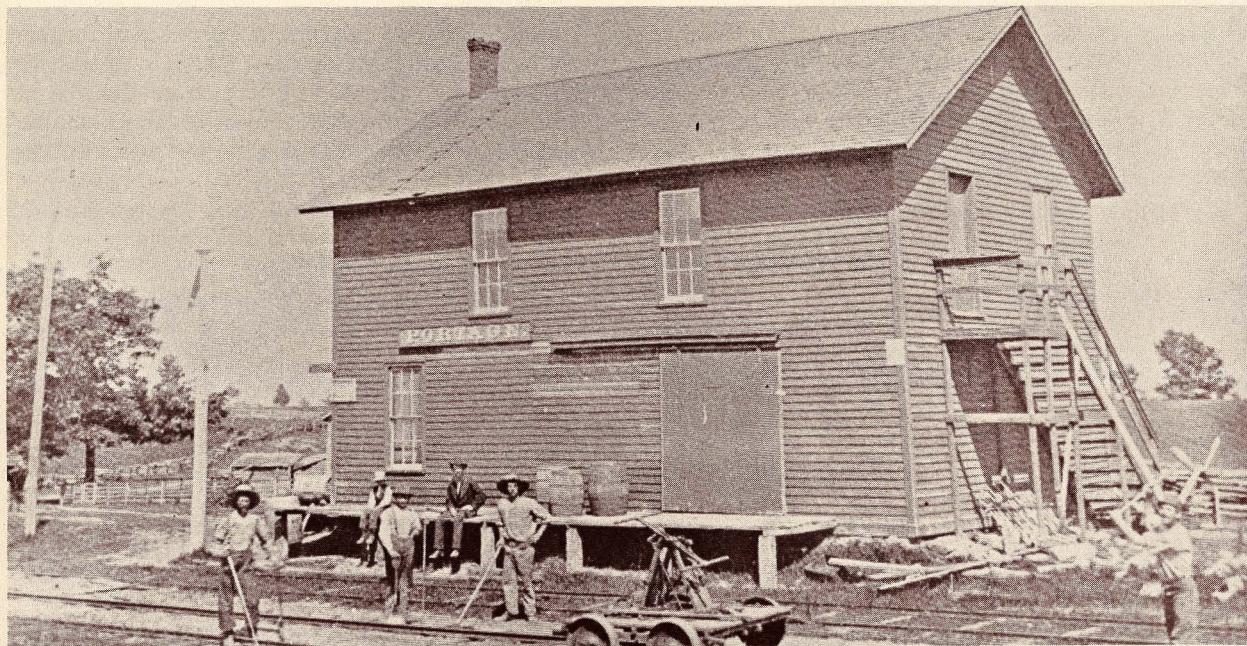
roads when they did not meet expectations. Although without equipment excepting shovel and hoe, the overseers of highways were expected by early settlers to provide smooth roads without ruts, tree stumps or high weeds. Among other reasons, the pioneers needed good roads to transport their produce to market, to reach the gristmill to have corn ground into cornmeal and to visit the taverns found in the township from its earliest days.

The Kalamazoo and Three Rivers Plank-Road

Company was chartered in 1848 and the road was constructed first between Kalamazoo and Schoolcraft, passing through Portage approximately along the present route of Shaver Road. This road greatly increased ease of transportation for farmers, merchants and the general citizenry and was used extensively until the completion of the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railway in 1871, after which it was gradually abandoned as a commercial operation. A second company built and began operating the plank road from Kalama-

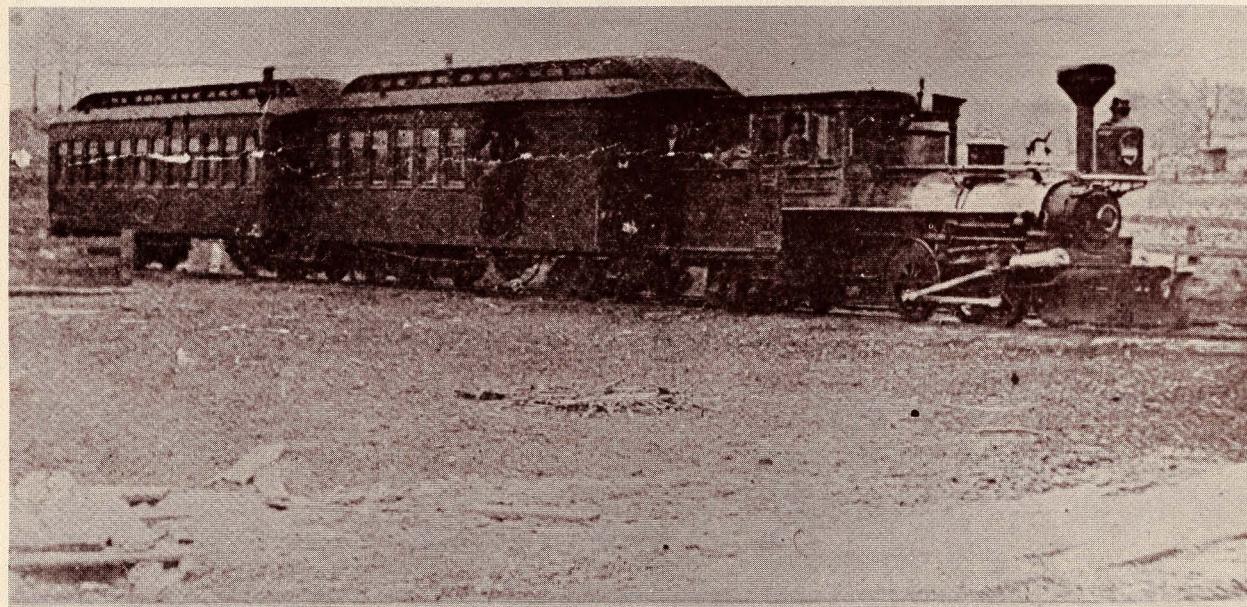
*Portage's changing roads - Westnedge at Centre looking north at the turn of the century and in 1976. The second house in both pictures was the birthplace of Hazel Wood Dontje in 1899.*





*Portage Depot, 1875 - This was the building which served as depot for the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railroad, now part of the Pennsylvania Central system. The line was built from Three Rivers to Kalamazoo in 1866-67 and reduced the stagecoach business which once covered the route. The Pennsylvania Central line on the east side of the city was once known as the Grand Rapids and Indiana system.*

*The first passenger train on the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railroad passed through Portage in 1869.*



**FIRST PASSENGER TRAIN ON L. S. & M. S. R. R. INTO ALLEGAN, MICH., 1869.**

zoo to Grand Rapids in 1852 and 1853. Today, commercial transportation interests in Portage include the Pennsylvania Central Railroad, which serves Portage industry along two tracks through different parts of the city. In addition, Dillon's Austin Lake Airport provides private airport

facilities; and, of course, the Kalamazoo Municipal Airport is located on a large plot of land once a part of Portage Township and though now owned by Kalamazoo it is surrounded on three sides by the city of Portage.

Moses Austin, who built his log cabin-tavern on Austin lake, is believed to have been the first person in the area to actually run his tavern as a hotel. For years it was no doubt the most popular place in the community for entertainment. Old records report that not only was the food superb but there was always entertainment and fun to be had at Austin's tavern and Austin, himself, is described as an extremely genial and pleasant host. His selling the property to John Hawkins and moving to Kalamazoo to enter business with his son must have been regretted by Portage citizens.

Ebenezer Stone's tavern at Carpenters Corners seems to have been another popular gathering place although not as well known as the one at Austin Lake. No doubt it was a much smaller establishment and perhaps was used as a meeting place for farmers in the vicinity. They may have gathered here while having their horses shod or some repair work done to the farm machinery at Carpenter's blacksmith shop.

When the stagecoach began serving Portage, Daniel Lathrop built quite an imposing hotel at Portage Center north of the present intersection of Westnedge and Centre Avenues and not far from

*An early tavern in Portage Center.*



*Shipping celery from Portage depot - 1905.*





*Celery ready to load at railroad siding south of Centre. At left is Mershon and Waring Feed and Coal Co. Note the Methodist Church at Centre and Westnedge in the background.*

*1975 view of the feed mill and loading area.*



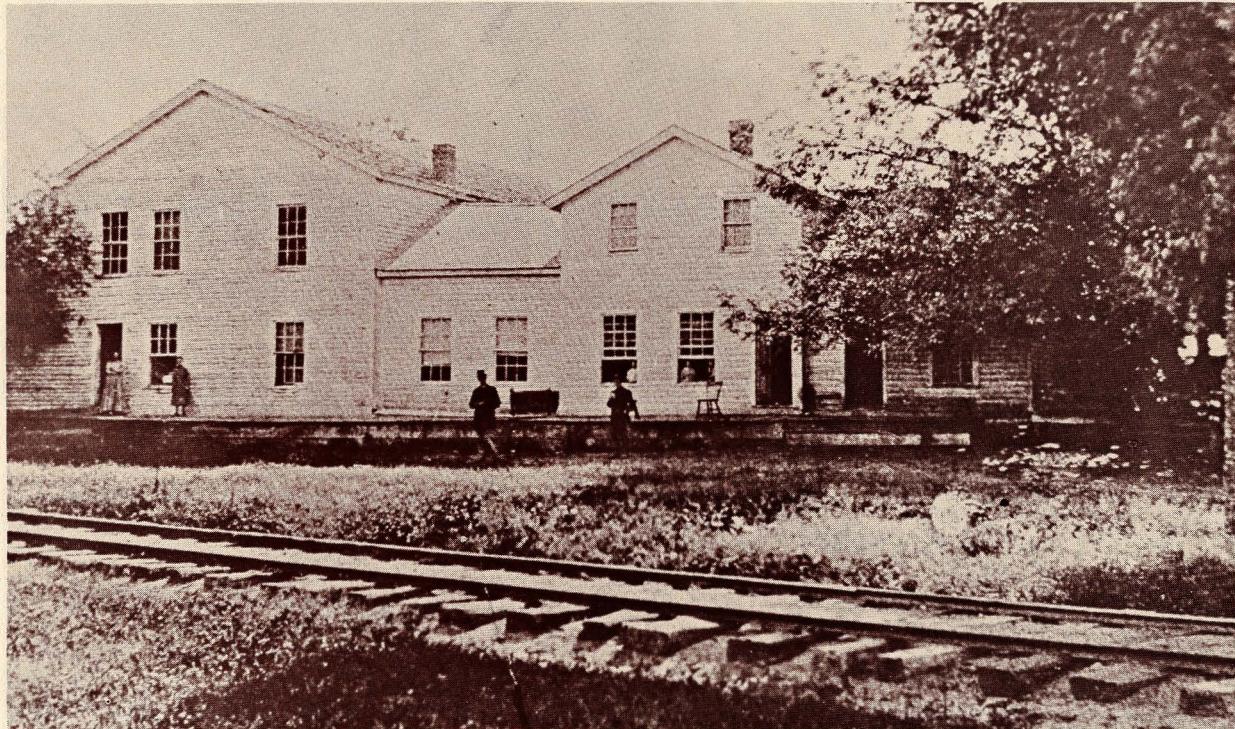
the tollhouse for the plank road. The old tavern that stood near the spot had proved inadequate. Not only was the area around Portage Center developing but more and more traveling men were coming to Portage selling the newest in farm equipment, seeds and a few comforts for the home. They needed an adequate place to stay and the new hotel more than met their requirements. Lathrop built a large ballroom for dances on the top floor and this drew young people from all over the country. Hay rides in the summer and sleigh rides in the winter would end up at the hotel where an excellent meal was served. The evening often ended in square dancing. When Lathrop sold the hotel to his successor, Clinton Bacon, the good times continued. It was a sad day for Portage when in 1886 the old hotel burned down.

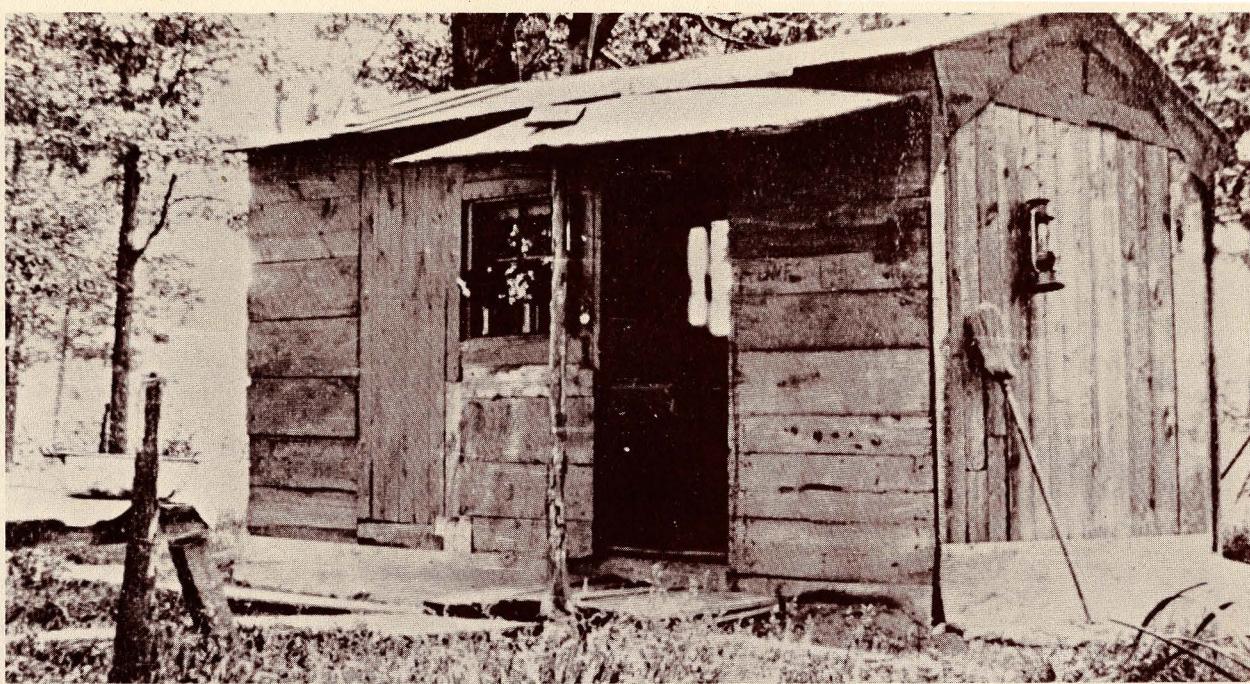
In a way the old tavern and hotel keepers set a pattern for recreation in Portage. There is no record of the lakes being used for recreational purposes until toward the end of the nineteenth century when recreational use of West, Long, Austin and Gourdneck Lakes gradually began to develop. Here and there small resorts began to appear and rowboats were rented for fishing. Often the boats were rented to picnickers wanting a leisurely ride on the lake. Private vacation cottages were built on small lake lots, and when not in use some were rented by their enterprising owners to friends for a week or two of vacation.

Ramona Park at Long Lake was probably the largest resort with a huge dance hall, picnic tables and a refreshment stand. Summer Home and Ames Resorts were other popular places for out-of-town people. A spur of the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad took merrymakers to the resorts on Long Lake. Countless picnics were held at these places during the summer. Some of Portage's older citizens remember the pioneer, Sunday School, family and school picnics held at the resorts.

With the coming of the automobile the use of Portage lakes did not diminish. In fact, as soon as the roads became well gravelled and later hard topped, the number of summer cottages increased rapidly. Later on some of them were winterized and used as year around homes. In recent years many substantial homes have been built and a large percentage are occupied the year around. Today there is ice fishing as well as summer fishing and rowboats, canoes, power boats and water skis all occupy their share of the waters. Ramona Park now belongs to the city and is continually being developed to better serve the citizens of Portage. There are also several other city parks, a commercial golf course on Oakland Drive, two large bowling alleys, two roller skating rinks, a drive-in theatre and a movie theatre for leisure activities. Many recreational opportunities in Kalamazoo are also enjoyed by Portagers.

*The Lathrop Hotel was built in the 1850's and burned in 1886.*





*Fannie's Abode - early 1900's. Summer cabin belonging to Fannie McGovern, one of the first on the south side of West Lake.*

*A picnic at the Lake. Front from left: Dontje boy, Lowell Matteson, Lettie Matteson and kids, a friend of Harriet's, Bess Southwell, Harriet Friedel, and Laura Gould. Back from left: Tom Southwell, Porter Matteson, J. Herlong, F. I. Southwell and Hazel Wood Dontje.*





*Take me out to the ball game - two early Portage teams.*



Because Portage is adjacent to Kalamazoo, the culturally oriented recreation of its citizens has developed through participation in the rich and varied cultural life of the larger city. The membership rosters of the Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra, the Kalamazoo Junior Symphony Orchestra (one of the few youth organizations of its kind in the nation), the Kalamazoo Civic Players including the Junior Civic Players, the Gilmore Art Center, the Kalamazoo Nature Center and numer-

ous other organizations include large numbers of Portage residents. In addition, many Portagers attend the fine performances and art exhibits offered by Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo College, Nazareth College and Kalamazoo Valley Community College.

Although parks and recreational centers have multiplied, the number of taverns and eating places in Portage has shown even more astonishing growth. It would be a waste of time to count

*These pictures were taken by Clyde Bacon in 1908. The car belonged to Minnie Newell and accident occurred on Portage road where Upjohn's now stands. This is looking north.*





*Members of the Portage City Council for 1976 are (seated, from left) Kurt Stern, Thomas Centilla, Mayor Betty Lee Ongley, Mayor Pro-Tempore Engel Corstange, (standing) Elmer Adams, Thomas Bloom, City Manager Donald Ziemke, and Donald Hinga.*

them all as new ones seem to appear almost overnight. A visitor to Portage can find almost any type of restaurant from the well known franchised chains which operate all across the country to the more deluxe dining rooms where leisurely meals are served. In many of the expensive restaurants private dining rooms are available for large gatherings. Taverns still thrive as in earlier days and every year the city council continues to renew licenses and now and then issue a new one.

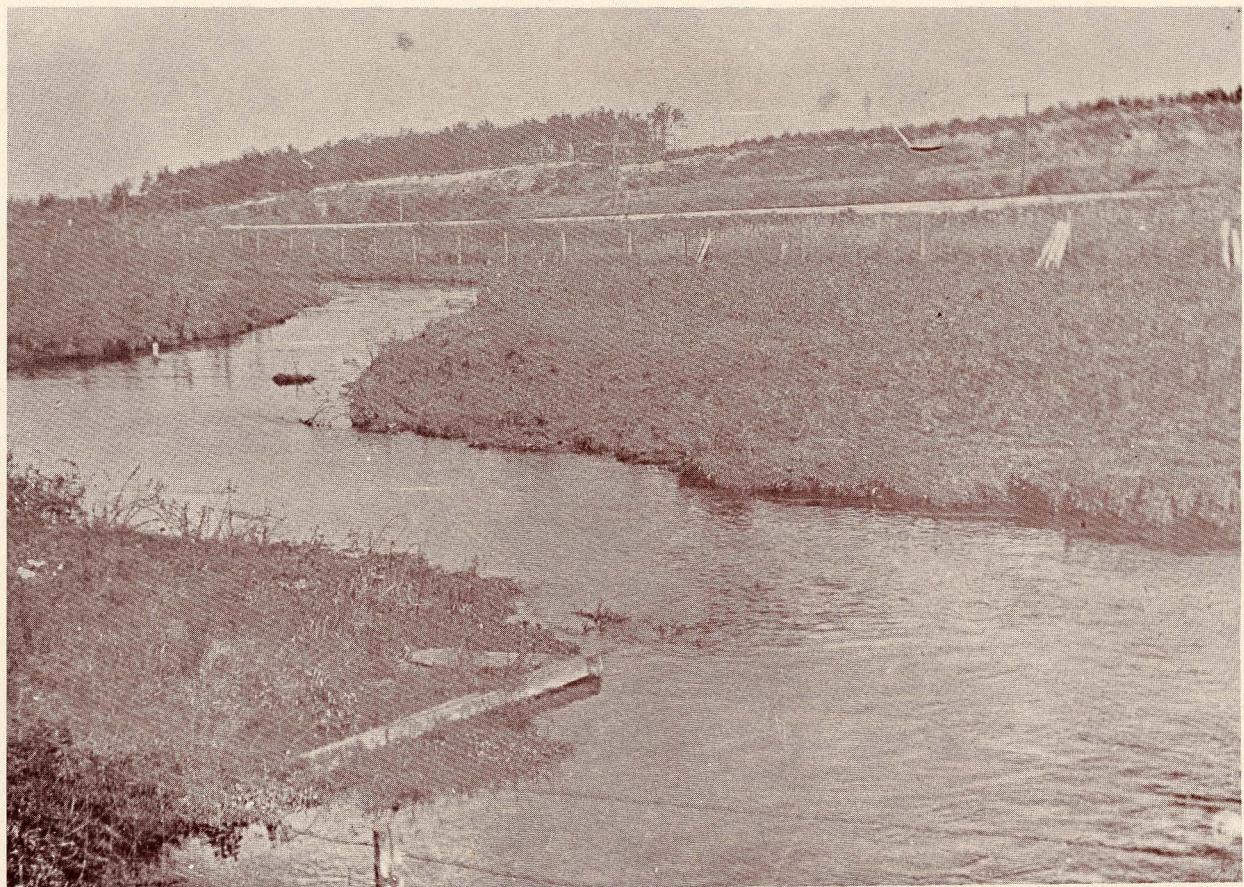
It would be difficult to determine how far customers travel to dine in Portage restaurants, but most eating establishments are only minutes away from major highways. As in the days of old, Portage is the connecting link between cities in the area. U.S. 131 offers fast transportation north and south and today connects the two rivers so important to the Indians by fast highway instead of twisting, curving trail. It is doubtful if travelers today give the rivers a second glance as they cross the concrete bridges over the St. Joseph at Constantine and the Kalamazoo at Plainwell. The two large midwestern cities of Detroit and Chicago are connected by Interstate 94, with Portage located about midway. Originally they were connected by the old Territorial Road, later known as U.S. 12.

All day long and far into the night the big trucks and cars rush along these two major highways. During quiet evenings the roar of their tires can be heard by present day citizens of Portage and Kalamazoo. Other busy roads are shared by these two neighboring cities. Perhaps the most frequently traveled are the old Indian trails that once heard only the soft whisper of moccasins which trod the curving paths through the forest. The trails became roads which are paved now so that even the sound made by the crunch of gravel under the wagon wheels and

horses' hoofs has long since disappeared. With the exception of what is now Portage Road, most of the curves have also vanished. An imaginative citizen driving along Portage Road can still visualize the old trail that was used so frequently by the Potawatomies and the first hardy pioneers.

During the rush hours the old Indian trails carry a never ending stream of traffic: Kalamazoo citizens coming to Portage and Portage citizens going to Kalamazoo. It would be impossible to estimate how many residents of the two cities travel back and forth one or more times each day. When evening falls intercourse between the cities continues with the sharing of such amenities as those offered by the cultural opportunities of Kalamazoo and the recreational facilities in Portage.

Portage, beloved by the Potawatomies and settled in the 1830's by the pioneers, seems to have reached the point of fulfilling its heritage. The wandering creek, a few of its wooded areas and many of its scenic beauties will be preserved for posterity. The Portage Bicentennial Committee has chosen for its project to develop a city park for several miles along Portage Creek. A gigantic but worthwhile undertaking! In 1980 Portage can celebrate its first 150 years of settlement. Eight years later the city can commemorate the 150th birthday of the organization of Portage Township. No doubt it will take all of these years to make the Bicentennial Park a reality. If the park is completed, Portage will gain a unique position among cities. It will have preserved for future generations the stream that carried countless Indians from one great river to another. No doubt this monument will create in future residents a pride of citizenship in a city that was never a village.

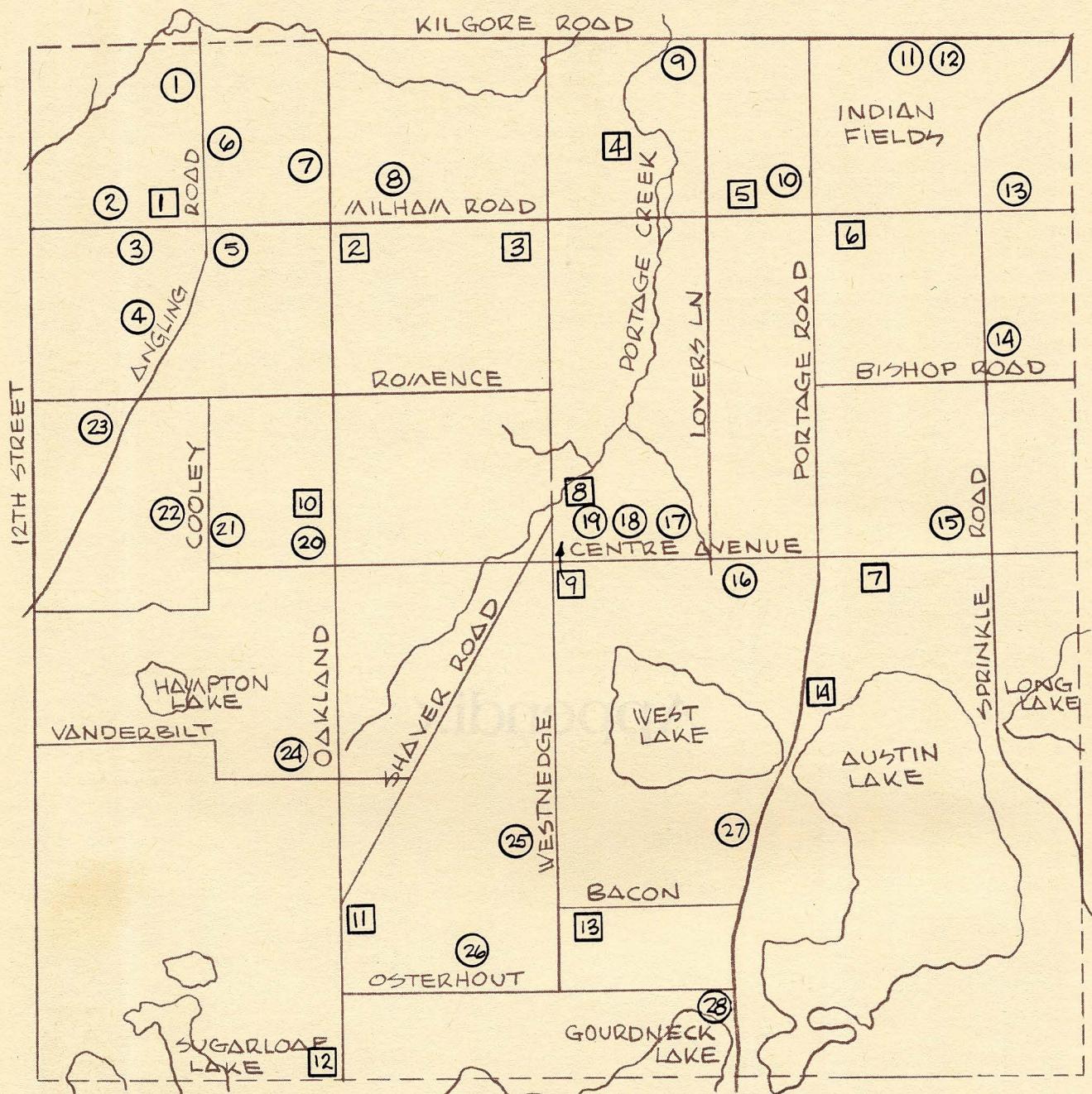


*The proposed Portage Creek Park will follow the meandering stream pictured here in the early 1900's and in 1976. The earlier photo was taken from the bridge on Westnedge across from Portage Plaza. Note the railroad track in the background.*



# Appendix

# Historic Homes of Portage



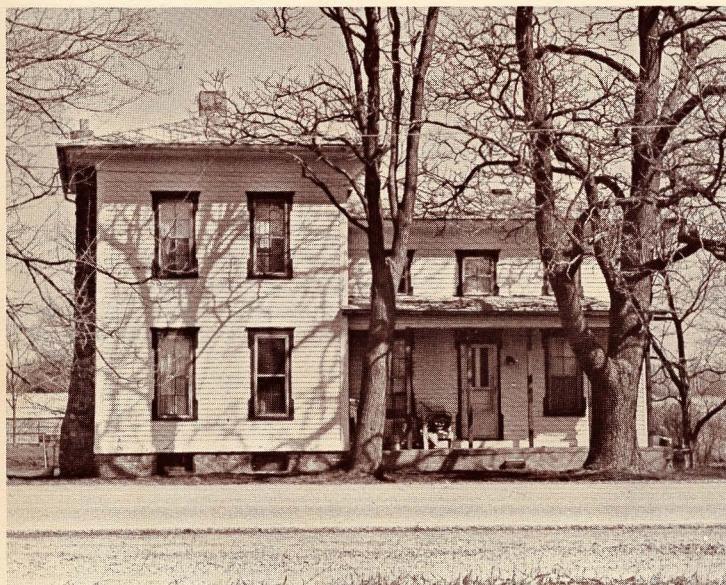
Circled numbers are historic homes

Boxed numbers are other points of interest

- 1 5260 Angling Road
- 2 3910 W. Milham Avenue
- 3 3821 W. Milham Avenue
- 4 6638 Angling Road
- 5 3221 W. Milham Avenue
- 6 5719 Angling Road
- 7 5720 Oakland Drive
- 8 1324 W. Milham Avenue
- 9 5136 Lovers Lane
- 10 5830 Portage Road
- 11 3512 E. Kilgore Road
- 12 3602 E. Kilgore Road
- 13 4415 E. Milham Avenue
- 14 4130 Bishop Avenue
- 15 7804 Sprinkle Road
- 16 1612 E. Centre Avenue
- 17 1221 E. Centre Avenue
- 18 515 E. Centre Avenue
- 19 309 E. Centre Avenue
- 20 7910 Oakland Drive
- 21 7737 Cooley Drive
- 22 7706 Cooley Drive
- 23 7138 Angling Road
- 24 2112 Vanderbilt Avenue
- 25 9426 S. Westnedge Avenue
- 26 922 W. Osterhout Avenue
- 27 9616 Portage Road
- 28 10630 Portage Road

- \* 1 District No. 3 School (Brooks later Dailey)
- \* 2 Dry Prairie Cemetery
- \* 3 District No. 2 School (Carpenters Corners)
- \* 4 Elijah Root Sawmill
- 5 Indian Fields Cemetery
- \* 6 District No. 1 School (Indian Fields, later Rockne)
- 7 District No. 6 School (Pershing)
- \* 8 Lathrop Hotel
- \* 9 District No. 5 School (Portage Center)
- \* 10 District No. 4 School
- 11 District No. 8 School (Prairie Edge)
- \* 12 Plank Road Toll House
- 13 District No. 7 (Lake Center)
- \* 14 Austin's Tavern
- \*No longer in existence

5260 Angling Road — Built sometime in the late 1850's after William Gibbs returned from gold mining in California. Gibbs had enough gold nuggets to buy 160 acres of land in section 6, build a house and buy a large tract of government land in Kansas. His wife, Jennetta Prouty Gibbs, was an enthusiastic gardener and the home, known as Oak Grove, had a beautiful garden as well as a conservatory for house plants. The property is now owned by R. E. Eddy.

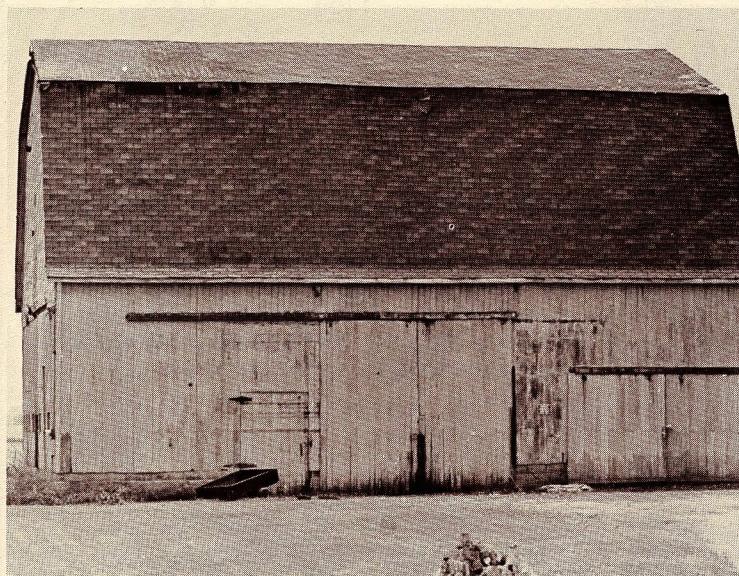
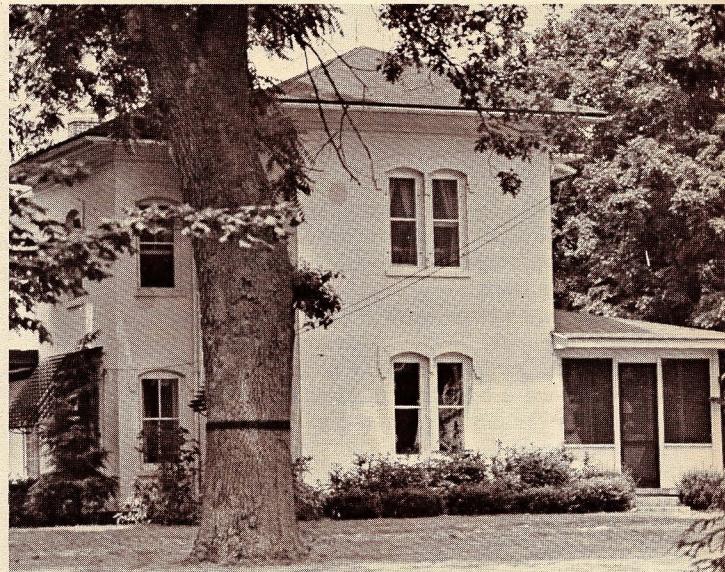


3910 W. Milham Avenue — Built by Stephen Howard between 1870 and 1875 for his son, George. The Howard family occupied the house for almost 50 years. William Hartman was the second owner and the property now belongs to Margaret Redmond. Her granddaughter and family are currently occupying the house.

3821 W. Milham Avenue — Built by Stephen Howard, very early pioneer settler, in 1859. Constructed using hand-hewn oak timbers, cut by Howard himself, for the basement and barn and handmade bricks, it was probably the first brick house in Portage. When completion was delayed by the Civil War, the family allowed dances to be held there to raise money for the purchase of local soldiers' uniforms. No doubt the people pictured are Stephen and his family who lived in the home until the 1920's. It was then occupied by Dr. Albert Henwood and his family. The present owners are Dr. & Mrs. Charles Van Riper.

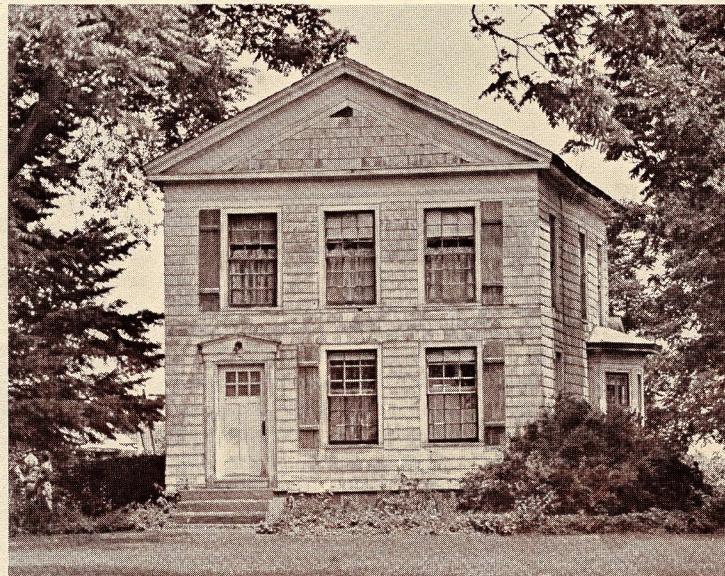


*6638 Angling Road — Built by Albert and Harriet Howard Brooks about 1870. This house was the showplace of the area. The parlor was furnished with a golden flowered Aubusson carpet, the drapes were heavy gold velvet and the furniture was of highly polished cherry and mahogany with horsehair covered settee and chairs. The room was used only on very special occasions for distinguished visitors. After her husband died, Mrs. Brooks lived there for a number of years and ran the farm with the help of a hired man. Later the farm was used as a nursery and the Wedel family occupied the house.*



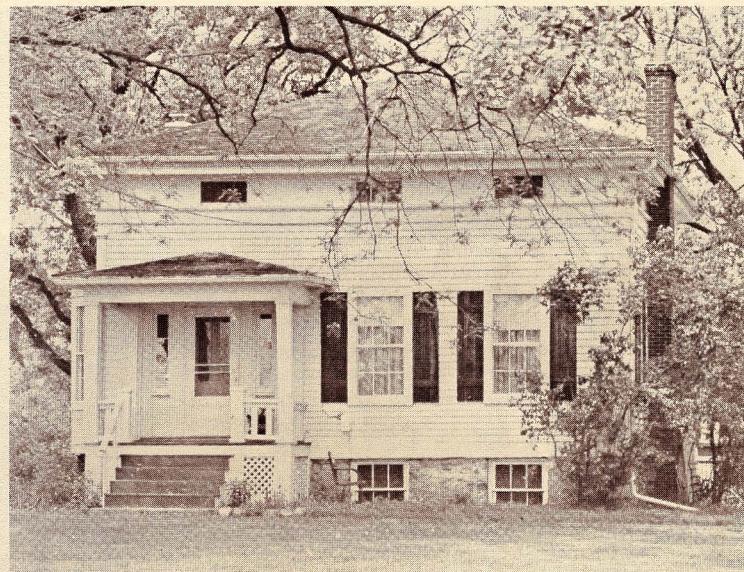
*3221 W. Milham Avenue — Built by Isaac Brooks, probably soon after he settled in Portage in 1835. The barn is adjacent to the Brooks' house which is still standing, though greatly remodeled. The house was later occupied by the Guy Dailey family.*

*5719 Angling Road — Built by John E. Howard and his son Stephen after they came to Portage in 1832. Probably the oldest house in Portage. Mr. Howard lived here until his death and his son Rossiter continued to occupy the house until 1862. William Boylan from Texas Township became the next owner and the Boylan family owned the property until 1975, when it was purchased by Rod O'Brien. Mr. & Mrs. Elmer Bishop lived in the house and managed the farm for over 50 years.*

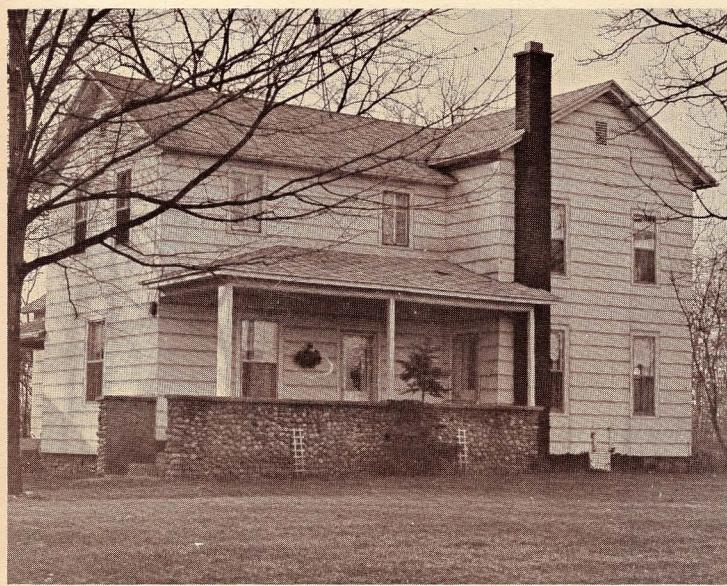




5720 Oakland Drive — Built by Joseph Beckley sometime in the 1850's and occupied by the Beckley family for three generations, this is the second house built on the farm by Beckley after he settled there in 1836. Joseph Beckley, Jr. was perhaps the longest occupant. Today the house has been divided into apartments and is owned by Dale Kramer. The picture is an old one belonging to the Beckley family.



1324 W. Milham Avenue — Located on land granted by the government in 1840, this house was reportedly built sometime before 1860. Well constructed with 22-inch thick walls, the property has been owned by Dr. Robert L. DeLong since 1963.



5136 Lovers Lane — Built about mid-nineteenth century by William Kilgore. His grandson, Herschel, and his wife now occupy the house which is surrounded by approximately 20 acres of the original farm. Kilgore is one of the few pioneer descendants, if not the only one, who still occupies the old homestead on farmland cleared over 150 years ago. The interior of the home has been extensively modernized.



5830 Portage Road — Built by David Smith sometime in the 1850's. One of the more elaborate Greek Revival homes, it was later occupied by Smith's son Jefferson. He sold the farm to William Cobb, wealthy sheep farmer who owned the house for over 50 years. The Carney family from Kalamazoo was the next owner. Presently the location of the Beacon Club, the property is now owned by Jack Thurman.

3512 E. Kilgore Road — Built by David Meredith in the 1850's, this house illustrates the Greek Revival style of architecture. The Meredith farm was in the family for three generations from David, who settled in 1849, through his son, Warren, and grandsons, Ben and Eugene. The house is unoccupied.



3602 E. Kilgore Road — Built by David Meredith about 1880, this house was first occupied by Meredith's son, Warren, and family and was later used as a tenant house. It is now owned by Mrs. Muriel Wooden.

*4415 E. Milham Avenue — Built about 1890 by William Milham, father of Allan Milham, this is one of the very few examples of Victorian architecture built in Portage toward the close of the 19th century. The property on which the house stands was at that time a very productive farm.*

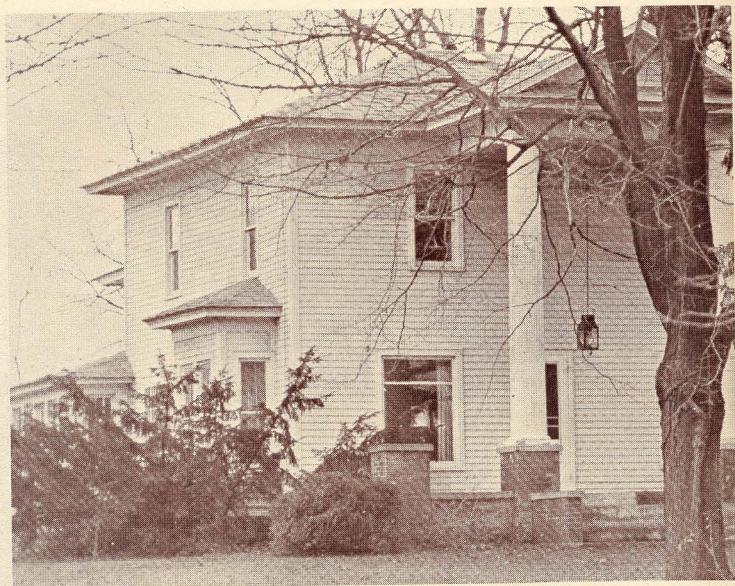


*7804 Sprinkle Road — Built by William Campbell, early Portage settler. According to his great-granddaughter, Patricia Hagerman, the rear annex containing the kitchen was built around part of the old log house that the family occupied for a number of years. William Campbell, Jr. lived in the homestead well into the 1930's and ran a productive farm. The Campbell family ownership extended over almost a century. The property is now owned by H. A. Tarnow.*

*4130 Bishop Avenue — Built by one of the Crooks brothers between 1860 and 1870, this house is located on the original Crooks farm settled in the mid-1830's and is a typical farmhouse of the period. Allan Milham owns the farm at present, and while not a Portage resident, he is one of the few descendants of early pioneers still owning Portage farmland under cultivation. Milham's ancestors include Joseph and Clarissa Sweetland Beckley and John Milham, who were very early settlers of the 1830's.*

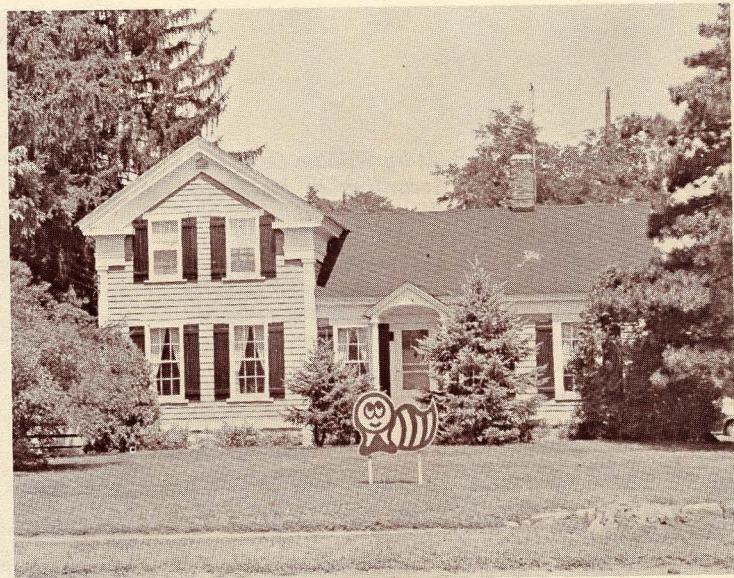


1612 E. Centre Avenue — For well over fifty years this land was owned by Moses Pike's son and grandson Nathan S. Pike and Nathan G. Pike. Somewhere around the turn of the century, Joseph T. Newell purchased 169 acres of the land and erected the present colonial type home. It was in turn inherited by his son U. S. Newell and his wife Belle Sweetland Newell. The couple was well-known for their hospitality and many social gatherings were held in their home. It is now owned by the Charles Cook family.



515 E. Centre Avenue — Built sometime before 1860. This house is typical of numerous Michigan farmhouses built following the Greek Revival architectural style and described as temple shape with an ell. The house was probably built by D. M. Smith, an early owner of the property and later occupied by the George Pike family. Present owners are Mr. & Mrs. Richard Resh.

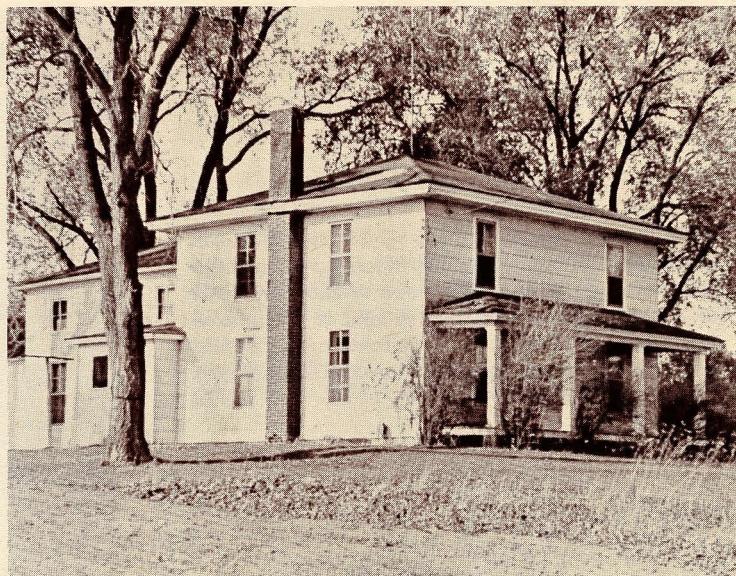
1221 E. Centre Avenue — Built by Daniel M. Smith before the Civil War on a 160-acre tract purchased in the 1850's, this house is in the style of a typical Michigan farmhouse. Square nails which were made by blacksmiths can be found in the original beams which have been put together in barn-like construction. Although much of the surrounding land was swampy, Smith farmed for a number of years and the property was later owned by Fred Cox. With the advent of celery farming in Portage, the land was divided and sold for numerous celery farms. Mr. & Mrs. Donald McKinley have owned the home since 1959.





309 E. Centre Avenue — Built about 1878 by Ira D. Matteson, uncle of Porter Matteson, on land entered in 1836 by pioneer Henry Tuttle. Brick for the double brick walls was hauled by wagon team from Mendon and the daughter of the kiln owner managed the team riding astride one of the horses. The Charles Warren family became the sixth owner of the home in 1934 at which time the interior was modernized. In 1975 Mrs. Warren, who lives there with her daughter, Eleanor, sold a portion of the property to the City of Portage for the new library. The building overlooks a grove of pine trees planted by another of the Warren's daughters, Mrs. Betty Wolbers and her sister, Dr. Mary Lou Warren.

7910 Oakland Drive — Built by Harvey Cooley, son of Arad Cooley, Between 1870 and 1880. The house was inherited by Gertrude Cooley Curry, wife of Daniel Curry, then occupied by Albert Curry and now owned by Mrs. Hattie Miller. According to Mrs. Ruth Clementz, granddaughter of Harvey Cooley, some of the trees still on the property were there when it was cleared for building and farming purposes.



7737 Cooley Drive — Built by Edwin Cooley, son of Thomas Cooley, early pioneer settler. Edwin Cooley went to Denver about 1864 to try his hand at gold mining. After a short time, he mined enough nuggets of gold to purchase some land in Arkansas and then returned to Portage. He acquired an 80-acre farm and built this substantial home and a barn that is still standing. Later the farm was increased to 140 acres and owned by his son Fred well into the 20th century. It is now owned by Scope, Inc. and occupied by Robert Stautz.



7706 Cooley Drive — Built sometime between 1850 and 1860 by Martin Bacon and later occupied by his son, George. The house remained in the Bacon family until the 1930's. Now the property of Scope, Inc. and occupied by H. A. Youngblood, the house has been extensively remodeled.

7138 Angling Road — Built by Thomas Houston about 1860. This typical Michigan farm house is on farmland obtained from one of the numerous land agents who speculated in land in Kalamazoo County. Owned by the descendants of the family until 1976 when it was sold to John Gomolak.



2112 Vanderbilt Avenue — Built about 1879 by Henry Vanderbilt after he moved here from New York and married Anna Cady, a native of Portage. They lived here for over 50 years. Present owners are Verlan and Norma VanRheenen.

9426 S. Westnedge Avenue — Built between 1870 and 1880 by Julius Matteson. Porter Matteson was born in the house and lived there until he was grown. The property later became well known as the Morren poultry farm. The house has since been divided into apartments.



922 W. Osterhout Avenue — One of the first in the southern part of Portage Township, this home was built between 1850 and 1860 by William Smith after he and his family had settled in section 33 in the mid-1840's. The farm was owned by the Smiths for four generations and at one time was known as a Centennial farm. The present owner is Mrs. Phyllis Ettwein, who bought the property in 1958 from a Smith descendent.

9616 Portage Road — Residence of the McCamley family for many years, this home stands on a farm bought by Daniel McCamley about 1870. It is now occupied by Stuart McCamley, whose father was township supervisor for many years and very active in local affairs.





10630 Portage Road — Originally built by the Wetherbee family and occupied by the family for a number of years. Mr. Wetherbee was an active citizen in township affairs. The house has been beautifully modernized and now belongs to Kenneth Bertolissi.

#### CONSTRUCTION OF SCHOOL BUILDINGS IN PORTAGE

School	Initial Construction	Additions
Central Administration	1922	1924, 1928, 1947, 1974
Lake Center Elementary	1928	1951, 1956, 1960, 1967, 1975
Central High School	1949	1954, 1959, 1967, 1971, 1976
Pershing	1951	1961, 1967
Milham	1951	1956, 1967
Waylee	1955	1962, 1974
Central Junior High	1957	1973, 1974
Ramona	1958	
Amberly	1960	
North Junior High	1961	1973, 1976
Haverhill	1962	
Angling Road	1963	
Lexington Green	1965	
Northern High School	1965	1967
Woodland	1968	
Central Elementary	1969	
West Junior High School	1972	

#### ENROLLMENT TRENDS

School year	Enrollment
1948-49	1,471
1949-50	1,692
1950-51	1,787
1951-52	1,978
1952-53	2,241
1953-54	2,429
1954-55	2,782
1955-56	3,093
1956-57	3,587
1957-58	4,120
1958-59	4,777
1959-60	5,571
1960-61	6,348
1961-62	7,121
1962-63	7,983
1963-64	8,478
1964-65	8,918
1965-66	9,450
1966-67	9,831
1967-68	10,414
1968-69	10,727
1969-70	10,854
1970-71	10,932
1971-72	10,991
1972-73	10,975
1973-74	10,979
1974-75	10,902
1975-76	10,866
1976-77 (Est.)	10,640

## FIRST PORTAGE TOWNSHIP OFFICIALS ELECTED IN 1838

Supervisor	Elijah Root
Town Clerk	Caleb Sweetland
Assessors	Martin Lathrop, James S. Chaffee, Rossiter Howard
Collector	Chester Crooks
Justices of the Peace	Ebenezer Stone, Caleb Sweetland
Highway Commissioners	Thomas J. Chaffee, Stephen Howard, F. W. Dunham
School Inspectors	Caleb Sweetland, Stephen Howard, T.W. Dunham
Constables	Chester Crooks, Chauncey Root
Overseers of Poor	Thomas J. Chaffee, Joseph Eastland
Pathmasters	Allison Kinne, Lowell Goodrich, Elijah Root, Enoch French, Jonas Woodard, Moses Austin, Elias Stone

## TOP TWENTY BUSINESSES & INDUSTRIES BY ASSESSED VALUATION

1. The Upjohn Company
2. Consumers Power Company
3. Shakespeare Company
4. Meijer Thrifty Acres
5. Village Green Properties Incorporated
6. Milham Meadows
7. University Custom Homes
8. Burdox
9. IBM Corporation
10. Mol Bee Incorporated
11. Roto-Finish Company
12. Independence Village Apartments
13. Jewel-Osco
14. Great Lakes Computer Center Incorporated
15. The W-L Molding Company
16. The Villas of Southland
17. The General Electric Company
18. Ronnigen-Petter Company
19. Bunting Brass & Bronze Company
20. K Mart Discount Stores

## PORTAGE HISTORY AT A GLANCE

1817	Governor Cass signs a treaty with the Indians which gives Indian land around Portage and Kalamazoo to the U.S. government.	1837	Michigan becomes a state, and the United States enters its first big depression.
1825	Erie Canal opens, making it easier for settlers to reach Michigan territory.	1837	Cyrus McCormick moves his McCormick Reaper Factory to Chicago and more reapers become available, so that farmer's work is greatly eased.
1830	William Bishop makes the first entry in the books of Brady Township, soon to become Portage Township and eventually, the City of Portage.	1838	There are about 20 families living in Portage Township. In March the first township meeting is held in the home of Moses Austin.
1830	A man named Herring builds a crude log cabin on the west side of Brady Township.	1838	Settlers withdraw from Pavilion Township and organize Portage Township.
1831	Caleb Sweetland and the three Cooley brothers, Thomas, Arad, and Benjamin, arrive from New York State on an exploring trip and decide to settle on Dry Prairie, west of what is now the Kalamazoo Municipal Airport. Other settlers will soon follow.	1840	Indians are deported from area and sent further west. Chief Pokagon and his group remain in Portage area.
1832-33	Elijah Root and Caleb Sweetland arrange first school classes.	1846	First railroad train from the East arrives in Kalamazoo.
1833	Moses Austin arrives and settles on the northwest side of what is now called Austin Lake.	1848	Kalamazoo and Three Rivers Plank Road Company is established.
1833	Church services are conducted in Indian Fields School District #1.	1850	There are 120 families living in Portage Township, including seven carpenters, three blacksmiths, and a bricklayer. There are six schools with a total of 240 students.
1834	A sawmill and a gristmill are in operation in Portage and the U. S. land office moves from White Pigeon to Kalamazoo.	1853	Kalamazoo to Grand Rapids Plank Road is completed.
1834	Crude schoolhouse is built on south side of Milham Avenue, east of Portage Road.	1856	First celery is grown in Kalamazoo area.
1835	By this year, two-thirds of the northern half of Portage Township has been entered at the government land office.	1856	Schoolhouse District #8 (Prairie Edge) is erected on Oakland Drive south of Shaver Road.
1836	Timothy Dunham starts a nursery with fruit trees and berry bushes which he brought by ox team from Ohio.	1856	Brick schoolhouse known as Indian Fields School is erected on south side of Milham Avenue, east of Portage Road.
1836	More land is sold and entered in the Kalamazoo Land Office than in any other land office in the United States.	1857	Tax assessment has reached \$2,167.13.
		1859	First brick house is built on Milham Road by Stephen Howard.

1863	Kalamazoo County Farmers Mutual Insurance Company is organized.	1928	District #7 opens a two-room school — Lake Center Primary School.
1866	Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad is completed through Portage.	1929	Consumers Power Company is given permission to lay gas mains in Portage streets.
1871	Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railroad is completed through Portage.	1930	New Masonic Hall is built on Centre Avenue.
1872	A printed advertising flyer appears which is later to become the Montgomery Ward catalog.	1931-32	Baseball and track teams win county titles.
1876	Masonic lodge is established.	1931-32	Basketball team wins county, district, regional and state championships.
1884	Fourteen windmill factories are operating in Kalamazoo.	1932	School enrollment reaches 381 with 18 teachers.
1885-1900	First Dutch families arrive and begin growing celery.	1934	Salaries of township board members are cut due to lack of funds.
1886	Lathrop Hotel burns.	1936	Stuart McCamley is elected township supervisor.
1900	More than 3,000 acres of drained muck land are in celery production; there are more than 200 celery growers and 25 shippers.	1940	First traffic lights are installed at Milham and Westnedge (Carpenters Corners) and at Portage and Milham.
1902	Methodist Church is erected on southwest corner of Centre and Westnedge.	1941	Central Fire Station is built on Westnedge and Jake Mein is named fire chief.
1902	Reformed Church services are held each Wednesday evening in District #5 schoolhouse.	1942	Permanent street signs are erected in Portage.
1903	First resident pastor arrives from Iowa for Reformed Church.	1945	The Upjohn Company acquires 1,500 acres on Portage Road.
1910	Reformed Church sanctuary is completed.	1946	Portage schools are consolidated and reorganized as Portage Township Schools.
1910	Twenty horse sheds are built for Methodist Church at a cost of \$350.00	1947	Varl Wilkinson becomes superintendent of schools.
1916	Wolber's General Store opens.	1948	The Upjohn Company opens Portage plant.
1920	District #5 School (Portage Center) becomes a teacher training center for Western State Normal College.	1949	Portage High School, later to be known as Portage Central High School, opens.
1922	Portage Agricultural School opens with five teachers and 183 students.	1950	Dr. R. Keith Currier establishes Portage Medical Clinic.
1924	Electric lights are installed in Methodist church.	1950	Portage First Reformed Church erects new building.
1924-26	Early plats are developed in vicinity of lakes.	1957	John Plantefaber is elected township supervisor.
1925	Band program begins in school and PTA is organized.	1960	Friends of the Library organized.

1961	The Upjohn Company office building opens on Portage Road.	1970	George Conti is appointed superintendent of schools.
1962	Portage Public Library opens on Milham Avenue.	1971	School enrollment reaches 10,991, a high water mark.
1963	Portage is incorporated as a city.	1973	Betty Lee Ongley elected mayor.
1963	Bernard Mein becomes first mayor of Portage.	1974	Donald Ziemke is appointed city manager.
1963	Portage Township Schools become Portage Public Schools.	1975	George VonBehren becomes chief of police.
1964	Portage Police Department is established.	1975	Business directory lists 33 industries operating in Portage.
1965	Portage Northern High School is opened.	1975	State Equalized Valuation reaches \$270,223,100.
1966	Frank Hemphill is appointed city librarian.	1976	Portage Public Library will open new building.
1967	Wolbers store closes after fifty years on the same site and under the same ownership.	1976	New fire station will open on Oakland Drive.

## PORTAGE CHURCHES - 1976

BEREAN BAPTIST CHURCH, 7813 South Twelfth Street. First met at Amberly Elementary School on January 12, 1969. Have been at present location since August, 1970, have a membership of 330, and plan to build a new sanctuary as soon as possible.

BETHLEHEM ASSEMBLY OF GOD, 7835 Lovers Lane.

CHAPEL HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, 2209 Romence Road. First met on October 15, 1961, at Portage North Junior High School in the Little Theater. Moved to present address August 14, 1966. Beginning with a charter membership of 86, the congregation has grown to 360 and is looking forward to building a sanctuary next to the fellowship hall.

THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF CHRIST THE KING (EPISCOPAL), 2600 Vincent Drive. First met at Angling Road School in April, 1967, and moved to the present location May, 1969. Built at a cost of more than \$1,600,000, The Cathedral is the seat of the Diocese of Western Michigan.

FAITH REFORMED CHURCH, 308 West Milham Avenue. First ministered to the Carpenters Corners' area children prior to World War II by busing youngsters to Trinity Church, then meeting in a home and finally building a church at the present site in 1948. The new sanctuary was erected in 1954.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF PORTAGE, 1105 East Centre Avenue.

FIRST CHURCH OF GOD, 1917 East Centre Avenue.

FIRST CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE, 5625 Oakland Drive. First met in a hall on North Rose Street in Kalamazoo on November 18, 1924. After meeting in five different locations in Kalamazoo, the congregation bought 10 acres on Oakland Drive in 1960, where a parsonage and fellowship hall were built. Present church was completed in 1964.

FIRST REFORMED CHURCH OF PORTAGE, 7905 South Westnedge Avenue. (See chapter 7)

FIRST MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH,  
2202 Ramona Avenue.

FULL GOSPEL COMMUNITY CHURCH, 5329  
Chamberlain Street.

GRACE BAPTIST CHURCH, 3600 Milham  
Avenue. First met at Milham School in 1963 and  
moved to present location in 1969.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES PORTAGE CON-  
GREGATION, 7415 Oakland Drive.

LAKE CENTER BIBLE CHURCH, 805 East  
Osterhout Avenue. The congregation first met  
October 17, 1937 at Lake Center School, moved to  
Portage Road and Bacon in 1948 and to present  
location in November of 1962.

LEXINGTON GREEN CHRISTIAN RE-  
FORMED CHURCH, 5828 Cheshire Street. First  
met in the Lexington Green Elementary School  
March 6, 1966 and moved to present location  
September 17, 1970.

LORD OF LIFE LUTHERAN CHURCH, 9420  
Portage Road. First met at Lake Center School in  
October, 1966, and moved to present location  
May 28, 1969.

MAPLEVIEW BAPTIST CHURCH, 10601  
Shaver Road.

NEW APOSTOLIC CHURCH, 2615 Kalamazoo  
Avenue.

OAKLAND DRIVE CHURCH OF CHRIST,  
7331 Oakland Drive.

PORTAGE CHRISTIAN REFORMED  
CHURCH, 10010 Portage Road. First meeting  
was at the present location in February of 1966.

PORTAGE CONGREGATIONAL UNITED  
CHURCH OF CHRIST, 2713 West Milham  
Avenue. First met at Haverhill School September  
9, 1962, and moved to present location September  
10, 1967. A new educational wing, which houses a  
weekday nursery school, was completed in 1975.

PORTAGE FIRST UNITED METHODIST  
CHURCH, 8740 South Westnedge Avenue. (See  
chapter 7)

PORTAGE FREE METHODIST CHURCH,  
1715 West Centre Avenue.

PRAIRIE EDGE CHRISTIAN REFORMED  
CHURCH, 9316 Oakland Drive. First met on  
April 2, 1937 in the old Prairie Edge School on  
Oakland, south of Shaver. Later used a one room  
chapel on Oakland, and this building was later  
used for chicken processing and then housed  
Great Lakes Graphic Arts. Building at the  
present location was built in 1956 and remodeled  
and enlarged in 1969.

PRINCE OF PEACE LUTHERAN CHURCH,  
1747 West Milham Avenue. First met at present  
location March 31, 1963, with 213 people in  
attendance. An education wing was added in  
1967; membership in 1975 was 706.

SAINT BARNABAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH,  
929 East Centre Avenue. First met at Ramona  
Lane School on March 6, 1960, as a mission of St.  
Lukes Church, Kalamazoo. First service in the  
present building was April 20, 1962.

SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA CHURCH,  
1150 West Centre Avenue. First met at Portage  
Central Junior High in August, 1966, and moved  
to the present location in 1970.

SAINT JAMES EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN  
CHURCH, 2381 Romence Road. First met in 1967  
at Amberly Elementary School and moved to  
present location in 1974.

SAINT MICHAEL LUTHERAN CHURCH,  
7211 Oakland Drive.

SOUTH RIDGE REFORMED CHURCH, 1819  
Romence Road. First met October 9, 1960 at  
Amberly School and moved to present location in  
1963.

WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,  
1515 Helen Avenue. First met in June, 1957, at  
Milwood School and moved to present location  
July, 1961. Beginning with 222 charter members,  
the Chruch now has 520 members.

WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD, Angling  
Road School. First met at Angling Road School  
December, 1969, and remain at the same location.

## SOURCES OF INFORMATION

To give some idea of the scope of this history project from a research standpoint, the following list of sources of information is included. Countless hours were spent exploring these sources.

Books concerning life in the 19th century

Available history books concerning Kalamazoo County

Newspaper clippings (unfortunately not always accurate)

Old diaries

Township meeting records (some missing)

Old district school minutes from three districts, 2, 7 & 8 (others not available)

School materials from newspaper clippings

Material written by former superintendents of Agricultural School

Old country school books from Kalamazoo Public Library

Michigan Historical collections (sections on Kalamazoo County)

Genealogical records (Magazines of Kalamazoo County)

Material on individuals from Kalamazoo Museum

Old tax records from 1849

Federal census records from 1840 to 1900

Agricultural records giving descriptions of farms, stock and valuation (productivity)

City surveys (2)

County clerk

County register of deeds

County probate court

County records of original government land entries

Cemetery records

Abstracts from homes given by private individuals

Old church records and present day membership records

Interviews with area residents including many senior citizens

Collection of pictures of private individuals — homes, schools, old pioneers, etc.

(always returned after photographed)

Kalamazoo City and County directories

Biographical sketches of pioneer citizens

# About the Editor



A native of Dallas, Texas, Posie Tomlinson was a 1949 graduate of Hockaday Preparatory School. Two years at Grinnell College in Iowa and one year at the University of Nebraska, followed. After her college years she held Civil Service positions in both California and London, England, prior to moving to Portage in 1956 when her husband, Dick, joined The Upjohn Company. Although their roots are not deep in the Portage community, they are nonetheless firmly fixed. Their three sons were born here. Bill, the eldest, is an alumnus of Portage Northern High School and a student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Steve is a student at Northern High School, and Charles is at North Junior High School.

Well known through her community activities, Posie epitomizes the philosophy that a citizen ought to be in partnership with his or her community. She has performed volunteer work in several of the Portage School libraries and served on various community boards. She has also spent many hours tutoring students with language disabilities.

That *Portage and Its Past* has become a reality is due in large part to the countless hours Posie has spent in editing the manuscript, selecting illustrations and supervising layout. As a source of inspiration to others, and through her untiring efforts, she has, in this book, contributed immeasurably to preserving the heritage of the Portage community.

Ted Vliek,  
1976

